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AUGUST 2002

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Prepaid mobile plans — are they for you?

Brands to rely on: FROM DVDS TO DISHWASHERS

How to get a good deal on air travel

Jane Mackenzie
Editor

Prepaid mobile plans come of age

Lots of people are interested in prepaid mobile phone plans: those who think they're paying too much under a contract, parents who want to keep control of their children's mobile spending, people on a strict budget, or those who'd just like the occasional convenience of a mobile phone without locking themselves into a certain amount of spend each month.

The phone companies seem finally to have realised there's a keen market out there and have stopped treating prepaid plans as poor relations. Call charges have come down and convenience has gone up: you can buy starter kits and recharge cards anywhere from your local supermarket to the post office.

There are 12 prepaid plans available from the four major networks, and we've evaluated them all to come up with the best value for money, depending on your phone habits: see page 8. And even if a contract might still work out best for you, using a prepaid plan for a couple of months (once your previous mobile contract is over) is a great way to work out how much you really spend on mobile calls, so you know exactly what you want from your next contract.

We have to thank CHOICE subscribers again for their help with a couple of the articles in this issue. More than 12,000 of you filled in and returned our latest appliance reliability survey, which was mailed to 50,000 subscribers at random. This gives great information for all subscribers about which brands you can — and can't — rely on for dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, microwaves, DVD players, clothes dryers and air conditioners (page 22).

Thanks also to the group of mums who road-tested 10 jogger strollers for us (see page 29). We didn't make them jog round the course — we recruited an experienced jogger for that — but they spent enough time with the strollers to work out that, generally speaking, they might be trendy but most are heavy, bulky, fiddly to adjust and a pain to transport around. All of which is a valuable insight that it'd be much harder to discover in a shop.

So thanks as always to all our subscribers who helped.

Jane Mackenzie, Editor

CHOICE

is published by the Australian Consumers' Association

YOUR LETTERS

We welcome the letters you send us — please always include a daytime telephone number so we can contact you quickly if we want to follow up your letter. We're sorry we can't answer every letter we receive, but we do use them in our research. Thanks for taking the time to keep in touch.

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FAX us on (02) 9577 3355.

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We test and rate products and services. Our ratings are usually based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a **Best Buy**. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted. Financial information in CHOICE is of a general nature, and is not intended to be advice on individual investments.

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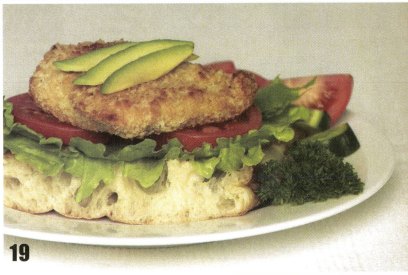


Inkjet printers

Buying a printer would be simple if more money meant better performance across the board. But the reality is, finding a printer that's good at everything is no easy task.

Our sister magazine, *Computer* CHOICE, ran thousands of sheets of paper through 20 inkjet printers to compare how well and how quickly they could print a range of different documents. Ease of use, environmental friendliness, construction quality and costs over time were also assessed.

In general, ink costs varied considerably, meaning a cheap model may not be the most economical option in the long run. Furthermore, only the **CANON S300** and **S200** could deliver good-quality black and white text — 14 printers out of 20 produced 'below average' results. If text is your highest priority, you may be better off with a laser printer.

The rest of the results:

- The **CANON S900** ($799) was the standout printer. It handles graphics beautifully and provides reasonable value for money as a photo printer. The **CANON S520** ($399) is a cheaper alternative. It still does a good job on photos and was the cheapest to run over three years.
- Looking for an all-rounder? The **EPSON Stylus C80** ($599) and **HP Deskjet 960C** ($499) both do a reasonable job across the board.
- For good-quality, speedy black and white text and good photos you can't go past the **CANON S300** ($249), which is cheap as chips upfront but a bit pricy to run over time.
- If speed is a priority, the **CANON S750** ($499) was one of the fastest printers across the board — including fastest for black and white text and standard graphics — while the **CANON S900** was fast for standard and best-quality graphics and photo printing.
- Of the printers tested, only the **EPSON Stylus Photo 1290** ($1099) was able to print on A3 paper.

If you'd like to subscribe to *Computer* CHOICE, call 1800 069 552 or see page 49. And if you're a CHOICE subscriber who's taking advantage of free trial access to our website, you can read the full article and results at www.choice.com.au/computers.

CHOICE SHOPPER UPDATE

CHOICE SHOPPER best value

We've been providing the **CHOICE Shopper** service, where we shop for you at good prices, since October 2001. And we're really pleased to see you're taking advantage of it: your use of this service really picked up in April, the latest month's figures to hand for this issue of CHOICE. 224 subscribers inquired about buying and 99 went through with a purchase.

The total value of the purchases made was $228,893, with savings off the best prices subscribers could find themselves of $19,267, or nearly 8%. The average saving on electrical goods was 9.4%, and four cars were purchased, with an average saving of 6.7%.

So if you haven't tried **CHOICE Shopper** yet, call 1300 360 655 (9 am–5 pm, Monday to Friday, wherever you are in Australia) and have ready the full brand and model details of the product you want and the price you want to beat.

You'll also need your CHOICE subscriber number, which appears on your magazine address label, above your name. It has eight digits and begins with one or more zeroes — for example, 00012345. If you can't find your number call our Consumer Services department on (02) 9577 3399 (8.30 am–5 pm EST, Monday to Friday).

CAN YOU HELP?

CHOICE is planning a survey of jeans retailers and manufacturers about their corporate social responsibility. We want to find out whether, and to what degree, they take on responsibility for the working conditions, remuneration and associated issues in their production centres in low-wage countries.

If you have any information about the industry that could assist us in our research, please let us know. We'd also like to know whether you'd be prepared to spend a little more money on your purchases if you knew the manufacturer and/or retailer had ensured that 'living wages' were paid to workers and no child or forced labour was used.

Please write to Jeans, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or email jeans@choice.com.au by August 16, 2002.

Thank you for your help.

Crawling towards sustainable consumption

With world media attention soon focusing on the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, you may ask yourself whatever happens to all the resolutions and recommendations that are drawn up at such gatherings. Are they destined never to be looked at again or will they be acted on?

The issue of sustainable consumption — using fewer resources and causing less pollution to achieve a better quality of life for all — was first discussed internationally at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Then in 1999 various elements of the issue were added to the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection, which provide governments with a set of guidelines they can draw upon when developing consumer policies and legislation.

The international consumer movement played an important role in setting the agenda at the time, and now, three years later, it's again been instrumental in tracking the progress of the guidelines' implementation. Consumers International (CI), the international alliance of over 250 consumer organisations, together with the United Nations Environment Programme, surveyed governments around the world and released the results in June at a preparatory conference for the summit.

The Australian Consumers' Association was one of the founding members of what's now CI, and Louise Sylvan, our CEO, is its president.

Although more than 50 governments responded to the survey, Ms Sylvan points out: "Disappointingly, some of the biggest resource-consuming countries did not respond to the survey and haven't yet used the guidelines to provide frameworks for achieving improvements." The map below shows countries that responded.

Overall, more than a third of the respondents weren't aware of the sustainable consumption guidelines — perhaps not surprisingly, considering they were only translated into French and Spanish just before the survey was sent out. While 80% of responding countries thought the guidelines were useful for policymaking, about a third thought they needed clarification and better explanation.

"Progress towards more ecologically sustainable economies is a high-level concern of consumers — governments need to lift their game," says Ms Sylvan.

A more detailed discussion of the global review report is published in the Winter 2002 edition of *Consuming Interest*. Call 1800 069 552 to subscribe.

NUTRIPLAN

Here's yet another miracle weight-loss meal-replacement product: this one's called **NUTRIPLAN**.

It's another flavoured protein blend you mix with water. The number of meals and snacks you replace with the resulting 'smoothie' depends on how quickly you want to lose weight — four a day for fast weight loss ('Attack phase'), two or three a day for steady weight loss ('Balance phase'), and one or two a day for maintenance of your weight ('Control phase').

In material that accompanies **NUTRIPLAN**, a reference is cited for evidence that the program is clinically proven for weight loss. Unfortunately, though, the study isn't yet published. And two further references given as evidence for the effectiveness of the **NUTRIPLAN** weight loss programs reported on trials not designed to test the product itself.

While the program is acceptable in that it meets recommended daily intakes for most nutrients, meal replacement programs aren't an ideal way to lose weight in the long term. A varied diet is essential for the full range of vitamins and minerals, as well as phytochemicals — nutrients in plants that we're still finding out about and that you won't find in any pill or potion.

The most efficient weight loss method that's maintainable over the long term is one that involves increased physical activity and small, incremental dietary changes. This helps you change gradually to low-fat, healthy eating practices, while at the same time maintaining a diet with a variety of interesting and nutritious food. Other shortcomings of meal replacement programs over the long term include their cost and the potential boredom factor.

In the 'Attack' phase of the program, one **NUTRIPLAN** smoothie is recommended for breakfast on its own four days of the week. On the other three days you can have a piece of fruit as well. We've come up with an alternative breakfast that supplies a similar amount of nutrients. You be the judge of which you'd prefer.

Our alternative breakfast;

- Two Weetbix with skim milk, and one cup of freshly chopped fruit with two tablespoons of low-fat yoghurt, or
- A **NUTRIPLAN** smoothie.

Our alternative supplies a similar number of kilojoules, but around a teaspoon less fat and 2 g more fibre.

70% OF AUSTRALIANS AT RISK OF STROKE

Are you at risk of stroke? The July/August issue of CHOICE *Health Reader* reports that most Australians have at least one risk factor, and some are seriously at risk.

Stroke is the third-biggest cause of death in Australia (after heart disease and cancer). Each year, more than 40,000 Australians have a stroke — a third of these people will die within a year, and half will be disabled.

Though it's commonly thought of as a brain disorder, the disease itself is caused by a build-up of fatty deposits in the lining of the walls of medium-sized and larger arteries in the body.

When this process — called atherosclerosis — occurs in the arteries of the brain, it interrupts blood flow to brain tissue. If the reduction in blood flow is extensive or sudden, brain tissue can die, causing a stroke.

Atherosclerosis is especially common in people who have one or more risk factors: a family history of the disease, smoking, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, or having a higher than normal blood cholesterol level. Other factors include being a male, drinking alcohol to excess, physical inactivity and stress.

ANTHONY ASHER

Worryingly, a recent study of 16,148 people aged 30 or older found that 70% had one or more risk factors for stroke, and 34% had two or more.

The most prevalent was high blood pressure — an alarming finding because this, the researchers say, is the most important risk factor of all. Next most common were high blood cholesterol (43%) and smoking (17%).

The good news is that stroke is preventable — if you're concerned, see your doctor and discuss ways of reducing your risk.

Your doctor may advise you to:

- Lose weight.
- Stop smoking.
- Make sure your blood pressure is controlled.
- Put yourself on a low-fat diet.
- Drink less alcohol.
- Exercise regularly.
- If you're a woman over 30 taking oral contraceptives, consider another form of contraception (the pill is associated with a higher risk in older women).
- If you're diabetic, make sure your blood sugars are as controlled as they can be.

Also in this issue of *Health Reader*:

- Mondayitis can kill: more people have a heart attack on a Monday than any other day of the week — especially if it's cold, or early in the day.
- In July CHOICE, we highlighted research linking folate consumption and reduced risk of Parkinson's disease. New research suggests regularly eating foods rich in folate, as well as vitamins B_6 and B_{12}, could also reduce the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

If you'd like to subscribe to *Health Reader*, call 1800 069 552.

WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

ENRON SHARES, ANYONE?

Our sister organisation in the US asked in June, "Feeling left out because you haven't lost money in the Enron flameout? There's still time." According to *Consumer Reports*, Frame-A-Stock, a company that sells "truly unique gifts to give for a baptism, wedding, anniversary or any other occasion", offered framed Enron shares for US$39.95, plus US$10.95 for shipping — something of a mark-up from the 26 cents they cost on the last day of trading. A unique gift, perhaps, for a marriage destined for failure?

UNSAFE TO EAT DOUGH

The fiscal, European kind, that is. Irish *Consumer Choice* reported earlier this year on a warning from Eugenio Solans — a member of the European Central Bank — that the new euro poses a risk of toxicity. Apparently, the printing ink may cause illness if you eat around 400 of the new notes...

CONSUMER DRIVES POINT HOME

A lucky Austrian recently got what he *thought* he'd won on a mail order company's scratchie, by suing for it. According to *Konsument*, the scratched-off number matched the one on the pictured soft-top car — if the numbers match, you can drive away, proclaimed the ticket.

Initially, the mail order company refused to honour the win, citing conditions of entry on the inside of the envelope that said matching numbers entitled you to participation in a draw only. But as you can sue for a promised 'win' under Austrian law, the would-be winner did so.

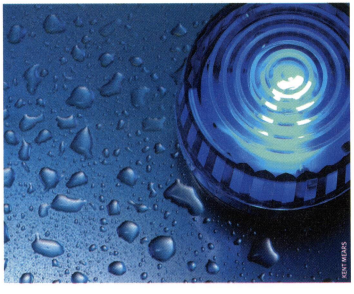
The court agreed with the consumer — it's the overall impression that counts, and if there's any doubt due to unclear wording, the party that used it has to face the consequences. Good one.

Prizes you pay for

My wife and I are renovating our house, and have been shopping for an alarm system to protect our new asset.

During the early stages of getting quotes, imagine how thrilled we were to be contacted by a large national security firm and told our name had been 'drawn' to win an alarm system valued at $899. Excitement turned to disgust when we found that to claim our 'prize', we had to sign up for a three-year monitoring contract at around $400 per annum. When we said we didn't want monitoring, we were told we couldn't have our 'prize'. As this firm regularly advertises a free $899 alarm system if you sign up for a monitoring contract, I fail to see how we had 'won' anything but the right to give them our money.

Even more surprising is that a few weeks later, we received a phone call from another security alarm firm, advising us that we had 'won' a runner-up prize — yet another alarm system, this time valued at $1500. Sceptical after our earlier experience, we told the caller that we didn't want monitoring, only an alarm system. To our surprise, they reiterated the value of the 'free' alarm system, and said that monitoring was a separate thing altogether. So we arranged an appointment with one of the



managers of the firm to receive our 'prize'.

Guess what? Another scam. This guy told us we'd misunderstood the telemarketer — the prize was a monitored alarm system and we needed to sign a monitoring contract. He also admitted that any normal customer could probably get a basic system installed free if they signed up for monitoring, and even claimed that the police wouldn't attend a crime scene if your alarm system wasn't monitored. This is blatant scaremongering as, in my experience, police won't attend a monitored alarm either unless there's a crime in progress. And there's no difference between an alert raised by a monitoring firm or an eagle-eyed neighbour.

Please warn consumers of the unethical scam perpetrated by some of our largest security firms. We only requested quotes from three companies, and were contacted in this manner by two of them.

We're getting our alarm from a reputable, ethical company that didn't pressure us to accept monitoring, and are happily paying full price for it — it's actually cheaper than either of the two described. It just goes to show that a prize isn't always all it seems, and can end up costing you a lot of money.

Spiro Vournazos
East Bentleigh, Victoria

This appears to be another case of 'if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is'.

THUMBS UP

- Anne Riddell, via internet, gives a thumbs-up to Mr Fothergill's Seeds, which sent her two packets of annual seeds and, later, two of bulbs, after she contacted them, disappointed in the number of bulbs that had grown from her original two packs.
- From Laurel Muys of Glenfield, NSW, thumbs-up to the ABC Seamless Aluminium Guttering Company, which replaced her guttering 'superbly' and cleaned up afterwards, while she was holidaying; plus she'd only paid a deposit.
- And from Bill Stockwell, of Bridgetown, WA, a hearty thumbs-up to Lockwood Security Products, after they examined then replaced an expensive screen door closer, although he had no proof of purchase.

We contacted the NSW Department of Fair Trading about the legality of offering such a 'prize'. A spokesperson said the practices Spiro describes are not uncommon in the security industry, with the legality or otherwise hinging on whether traders honestly disclose the true cost of their services before the contract is signed. They added that it's most unlikely any company would really give away a security system — the cost of the system is very likely included in the fee for the monitoring service.

You can contact Fair Trading in your state or territory with queries about specific companies.

Police Victoria told us they don't attend every time an alarm goes off — whether it's monitored or not — unless they're alerted to evidence of criminal activity.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs — see page 2 for how to contact us. To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Spiro Vournazos of East Bentleigh, Victoria, receives *Our Home* or any other book of his choice from Consumer Bookshelf, pages 34 to 36.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract.

Will prepaid save you money?

A prepaid service makes you the master of your mobile phone spending — but are there any pitfalls?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Prepaid gives you control** *over your costs and you don't have to commit yourself to a long-term contract. They're a great idea for many people (see* Who would it suit?, *far right).*
- **Some prepaid deals** *have reasonably cheap call rates. We've compared all available prepaid offers from four major mobile networks* ***(TELSTRA, OPTUS, VIRGIN*** *and* ***VODAFONE),*** *to help you find the best value — see the table, page 12.*
- **However, some service providers** *charge higher call rates for prepaid than for certain contract-based plans. You may also have to pay what amounts to a hidden exit penalty if you want to change to another network — see* Fine-print exit fees, *page 11.*

Over 11 million Australians use mobile phones and the number has grown by about 20% a year. Consumers are slowly becoming more educated about prices and deals, which may explain their growing preference for prepaid services instead of contracts.

Until recently, Australian mobile service providers concentrated on signing people up to long-term contracts, with monthly service charges and sometimes heavy penalties if you ended the contract early. Phone companies haven't done much to encourage consumers to prepay for mobile services. It's been viewed as a cost-effective way to supply the 'bottom end' of the market, but this is changing rapidly. Prepaid is now the fastest-growing sector of the market for mobile services. It's attracting both new and existing mobile customers.

WHAT IS PREPAID?

If you've never owned a mobile before, prepaid is an easy starting point. It allows you to pay for your mobile phone service in advance. You simply buy a starter kit with or without a new handset. It gives you a period of access to the phone network and a dollar amount of call credits. When that runs out, you can 'recharge' your call credits (and extend your network access) by buying a card or voucher or using your credit or debit card to buy more call credits.

Prepaid services have the following advantages:

- **No contracts**. You don't have to commit yourself to a particular level of 'spend' each month. There's no minimum contract period, and no high fees if you want to terminate the service. However, if you do you can lose call credits, and some security fees seem to be disguised penalties for changing networks (see *Fine-print exit fees*, page 11).
- **Simplicity**. You can walk into a shop, buy a starter kit with or without a phone and you're off and running. You can purchase starter kits or replenish your call credits at thousands of retail outlets, including variety stores, petrol stations, supermarkets, fast-food outlets, newsagents, post offices, ATMs and online.
- **Pay as you use**. By paying in advance, you set the budget and can't overspend. Plenty of people who've previously had a contract-based mobile service are changing to prepaid because it's a better way to manage expenditure.
- Prepaid services are also changing and becoming more flexible — see *Increasing flexibility*, page 11.

WHO WOULD IT SUIT?

A prepaid mobile service is worth considering if you:

- Own your mobile handset and want to chase the best deals.
- Want very strict control of your mobile phone budget (such as students).
- Don't have a credit history (migrants, people under 18, women returning to the workforce).
- Want to provide your child with a mobile while controlling the cost.
- Aren't likely to need your mobile all the time. For example, if you work on a contract basis, you may spend $60 on calls one month and $10 the next.
- You don't think you'll use a mobile often, but still want one for the occasional convenience.
- Want to be able to receive calls and dial 000 only.
- Just want the benefits of mobile access without the hassle of a contract.

BETTER THAN A CONTRACT?

Some service providers still charge higher call rates for prepaid services than for some contract-based plans. If you know you'll spend more than $50 a month, it's worth comparing any prepaid offering with available contract plans. If you spend less than $50 a month on mobile calls, prepaid call rates are comparable to (and sometimes cheaper than) the lower-usage-level contract plans.

It's easy to over- or underestimate how you'll use a mobile phone. With most contract-based plans you'll pay for your committed monthly spend irrespective of how many calls you make. If you overestimate your mobile usage, you can end up paying more than you need to.

If you've never owned a mobile before, you can use prepaid to monitor your usage patterns for the first six months. Then you'll be better equipped to find the right contract-based plan if you think you need one.

STARTER KITS

Starter kits give you an initial value of call credits with an expiry date. Even if you use those call credits and don't recharge, your starter kit also gives you a period of network access, during which you can dial 000 and receive calls but you can't make calls.

- **If you own a mobile handset**, you just buy a starter kit. Prices are around $25 to $30. A kit usually includes a SIM card ('subscriber identity module', which identifies you to the network you've subscribed to), new mobile number, a user guide and instructions for activating the service, a prescribed dollar value of calls and a period of ongoing access to the network for incoming and emergency calls. You can 'port' (keep) your existing mobile number but be sure to ask for a 'porting' starter kit as opposed to one with a new

It's simple: you just walk into a shop, buy a starter kit, and you're off and running.

WHAT TO BUY

Peak: If you make most of your calls between 7 am and 7 pm, Monday to Friday (in rank order):

VODAFONE No Plans Pre Paid
VIRGIN As You Go Level 100*
TELSTRA Communic8 On

Off-peak: If you make most of your calls between 7 pm and 7 am weeknights or at the weekend (in rank order):

VIRGIN As You Go Level 100*
TELSTRA Communic8 Off
VODAFONE No Plans Pre Paid

** Although this plan requires you to spend $100 for a recharge card after the first $20 of call credits, the call credits last a year. If you think you'll make fewer calls than that, consider one of the other recommended plans.*

We used data supplied by OptimiseMe to compare the flagfalls, call rates, voicemail and SMS charges of all available prepaid mobile phone plans to come up with these lists of preferred plans. We looked at plans offered by four major mobile networks. **ORANGE** doesn't currently offer prepaid services and we haven't included onsellers of the networks' plans.

If you're fairly well aware of your own usage patterns and want to compare plans and current discounts for yourself, use our table on page 12.

Mobile phone products and services change regularly. We've checked with the companies to ensure these services will be ongoing but it's important to double-check call rates and features before buying a starter kit.

NETWORK COVERAGE

Check where the network's available before deciding on a mobile service provider. All networks have coverage maps on their websites, or ask a sales rep for a copy.

LEARNING TO BUDGET

Monica Szolke of NSW wanted her teenage daughter to have a mobile phone but was worried about ending up with huge bills.

"Zoe travels to school by train and is starting to go out with her friends, so I wanted her to be able to contact me in an emergency," Monica explains.

"She put some money towards the phone and initial call credits and I paid the rest.

"I felt that if we went for a contract Zoe might make too many calls and it would be too expensive.

"With prepaid she knows how much she's spent and she has to manage the number and length of calls so that her recharge cards last.

"I think it's a great way for her to learn how to manage her phone budget and there's no risk she'll overspend."

phone number. If you have a current mobile contract, check that the costs of breaking it won't outweigh any gains from the prepaid service, even if it's with the same provider.

- **If you don't own a phone**, you can buy a package that includes a handset (with battery, charger and handset user guide), SIM card, prescribed dollar value of call credits and a network access period. Handset packages currently range from $129 to $347, depending on the network and the phone you choose.

Make sure the handset has all the features you think you'll use. If not, you can buy one separately; see CHOICE, July 2002, for our latest test results.

No more cheap handsets

In the drive for competition some mobile phone resellers have been offering prepaid packages for as low as $49, including a phone, SIM card and call credits.

Unfortunately such bargains are no longer available. Kits were bought and centrally warehoused, and the phones stripped out of the package and shipped overseas, where they were sold for handsome profits. This may explain the introduction of SIM security features (see above right).

That's now pushed up the cost of prepaid starter kits that include handsets: the lowest price you'll find at the moment is $129.

CALL CREDITS

Starter kits, recharge cards and vouchers usually give you call credits up to a dollar value and with a time limit. Each network has slightly different rules about how call credit expiry periods work. If you don't recharge your service within the expiry period, you'll usually lose any unused call credits. If you recharge before the expiry date, unused calls may be carried over.

NETWORK ACCESS

This is the period of time you can continue to receive calls and dial 000 even if you don't recharge. **TELSTRA, VODAFONE** and **VIRGIN** now give 12 months' network access, with **OPTUS** giving six months. You automatically extend your network access period each time you replenish your call credits. If you don't recharge your call credits by the time your network access period is up, your account will be closed and your number discontinued.

RECHARGING

Before your initial call credits run out, you buy a recharge card or voucher or use your credit or debit card to replenish your service. Each network provides prepaid customers with a range of recharge methods, including:

- **Credit card**: You have to register, then dial a number to use your credit card to buy call credits. **TELSTRA** also allows direct debit, internet payment, Bpay and Australia Post Billpay.
- **Buy a recharge card** — available from thousands of retail outlets.

- **ATMs:** At some ATMs you can insert your debit card to buy a 'recharge voucher'.

Once you've bought your recharge credits, you usually have to dial a number supplied by your network and quote the recharge card or voucher number to be given your new call credit balance and expiry date.

New technology will soon make it easier to recharge a prepaid service directly from your handset. And prepaid cards are making way for the electronic distribution of prepaid vouchers and swipe cards with electronic top-ups. Optus World and Tandy stores have e-pay terminals that provide prepaid mobile users with a top-up facility.

FINE-PRINT EXIT FEES

Prepaid services are often promoted on the basis that they're free of exit penalties, but in fact you may have to pay what amounts to an exit fee if you buy a starter kit with a handset and want to change to another network. It's all done in the name of security, but appears to have benefits for the networks too.

- **OPTUS** charges $185 to remove its SIM security feature if you want to change to another network within 12 months of activating the service.
- **TELSTRA** describes its security feature as "a strong deterrent to would-be thieves" because it prevents your phone from being used on another network if it's lost or stolen. You'll pay an additional $264 to have it removed within two years of activating the **TELSTRA Pre-paid** service; $125 for **Communi8** plans within two years, then $27.50.
- **VODAFONE** handsets come with a security feature — they only work with a Fastfone SIM card. **VODAFONE** used to charge a $150 fee to remove the feature if you wanted to change to another network. It recently abolished that fee for both new and existing customers.
- **VIRGIN** charges no fee if you want to change networks.

These fees bear a strong resemblance to hidden exit penalties designed to discourage you from exercising your right to change networks. CHOICE's policy team is currently looking into their validity.

NO BILLS

You won't receive a paper bill if you're a prepaid customer. However, you can check your amount of credit at any time (you'll be given a number to call and it should be free). You'll also be given reminders (messages, beepers) when you're getting low on credit.

SERVICE LIMITATIONS

Most current prepaid services don't include:

- International roaming — calls made when travelling outside Australia.
- High-speed internet access. Low-speed access may be possible via a WAP cable handset.
- Some don't have International Direct Dial.
- Paging, faxing, 1900 calls or call hold/wait and call diversion services.
- Calls to satellite services.
- Calls to operator-assisted services.

Check with the service provider if there are specific services you want. Other services may be dependent on the handset.

INCREASING FLEXIBILITY

The barriers between prepaid and contract-based services are starting to break down. Prepaid is starting to be looked on simply as a method of payment, not a service type. Customers increasingly have the freedom to choose their handset and then whether they prepay or pay by the month.

For example, the **VODAFONE No Plans** option gives you the choice of paying monthly or prepaying and still receiving the same rates, though you get access to more services if you pay a monthly bill.

ANTHONY SAWERS

A starter kit with a mobile phone includes a phone, battery, battery charger, SIM card and instructions. The cheapest currently are $129; this Optus kit with the Nokia 3310 is $249.

IT'S ALL IN BLACK AND WHITE

Baffled by the fine print in mobile phone contracts? Consumers' Association telecommunications policy officer Charles Britton (pictured) has been hard at work on a checklist to help you decipher phone service contracts. Along with other consumer groups, he's developed a White List of consumer-friendly terms and a Black List of consumer-unfriendly terms. Both are based on the principle that you should have comprehensive and accurate information before signing a contract.

To find the lists, go to www.choice.com.au and type 'phone contract white list' or 'black list' in the search box.

RHONDA MARIETTE

	OPTUS Flat Call	OPTUS Free Call	TELSTRA Communic8 Off	TELSTRA Communic8 On
Starter kits with phone*				
Phone / price ($)	Motorola T190 / 199 Siemens A40 / 129 Alcatel 311 / 159 Nokia 8210 / 299 Nokia 3310 / 249	Motorola T190 / 199 Siemens A40 / 129 Alcatel 311 / 159 Nokia 8210 / 299 Nokia 3310 / 249	Siemens A40 / 159 Alcatel 302 / 169 Sagem MC930 / 129	Siemens A40 / 159 Alcatel 302 / 169 Sagem MC930 / 12
Call credits ($)	30	30	50	50
Starter kits without phone*				
Price ($)	29.95	29.95	25	25
Call credits ($)	30	30	25	25
Network access (months)	6	6	12	12
Recharge cards				
Prices ($)	30, 50, 100	30, 50, 100	25, 60, 100	25, 60, 100
Call credit expiry (months)	6	6	2, 6, 12 respectively	2, 6, 12 respectively
Call charges				
Peak times	One rate all day	One rate all day	7am-7pm Mon-Fri	One rate all day
Off-peak times	One rate all day	One rate all day	All other times	One rate all day
Peak call rate (cents)**	37	37	55	38.5
Off-peak call rate (cents)**	37	37	11	38.5
Call charge increments (seconds)	30	30	1	1
Flagfall (cents)	16.5	16.5	20	20
Voicemail deposit (cents per 30 seconds)				
At all times	Free	Free	Free	Free
Voicemail retrieval (cents per 30 seconds)				
Peak	16	16	55	38.5
Off-peak	16	16	11	38.5
SMS deposit (cents per message, maximum 160 characters)				
At all times	25	25	22	22
Discounts	7pm to 7am every night, 22 cents for first 10 minutes to any Australian mobile network	9pm to 7am every night, first 20 minutes per call free to other Optus prepaid mobile phones	First 15 minutes of each call free to another Communic8 mobile	First 15 minutes of each call free to another Communic8 mobile

* *Starter kits with a phone have the same network access periods as those without a phone. The call credit expiry period for starter kits is the same as the minimum period for recharge cards.*

** *For 30 seconds.*

(A) *Plus one extra month for every additional $20.*

(B) *Starter kits no longer available for new customers.*

(C) *No flagfall on Vodafone to Vodafone calls.*

(D) *Vodafone automatically calls you at no cost when you receive a new voicemail message, and if you take the message then it's also free; if you dial in to receive messages normal call rates apply.*

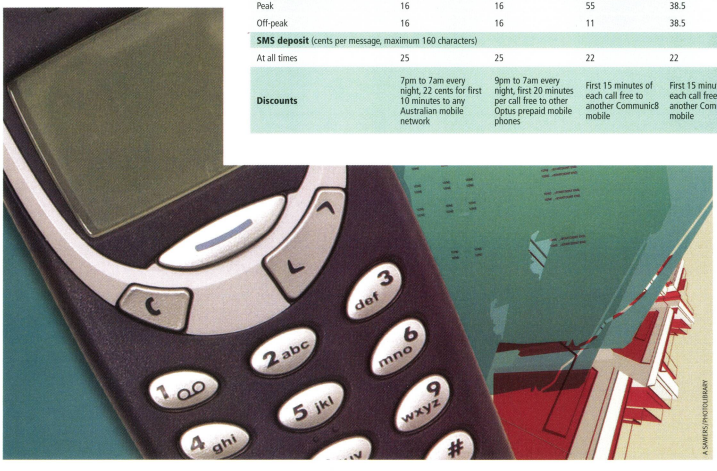
(E) *For example, if you buy a $20 recharge card you get 20 free minutes. They're only usable on calls within Australia to Australian Vodafone mobiles, and they expire when your call credits expire if you haven't used them.*

(F) *The rate for calls to other mobile networks; see discounts for other call rates.*

(G) *Peak flagfall is 13 cents, off-peak 17 cents.*

(H) *Other handsets may be available, depending on the retailer.*

SOURCE: OptimiseMe. Information current as of July 3, 2002. OptimiseMe is a service that can help you find the best mobile phone plan for your needs. To try it, call 1300 792 297 or go to www.optimiseme.com.



A.SAHLER/PHOTOLIBRARY

TELSTRA Pre-Paid	VODAFONE AnyTimeFREE	VODAFONE Standard Pre Paid	VODAFONE No Plans Pre Paid	VIRGIN As You Go Level 15	VIRGIN As You Go Level 30	VIRGIN As You Go Level 50	VIRGIN As You Go Level 100
LG DM150 / 347 Ericsson a1228c / 248	**(B)**	**(B)**	Philips Fisio / 179 Siemens M35i / 249 Ericsson T65 / 299	Motorola T190 / 199 Siemens C45 / 229 Nokia 3310 / 249 **(H)**	Motorola T190 / 199 Siemens C45 / 229 Nokia 3310 / 249 **(H)**	Motorola T190 / 199 Siemens C45 / 229 Nokia 3310 / 249 **(H)**	Motorola T190 / 199 Siemens C45 / 229 Nokia 3310 / 249 **(H)**
50	**(B)**	**(B)**	20	20	20	20	20
25	**(B)**	**(B)**	29.95	29	29	29	29
25	**(B)**	**(B)**	20	20	20	20	20
12	**(B)**	**(B)**	12	12	12	12	12
20 minimum	20, 30, 50, 100	20, 30, 50, 100	20, 30, 50, 100	15	30	50	100
3 for every $20 **(A)**	12	12	12	1	2	6	12
7am-7pm Mon-Fri	One rate all day	7am-7pm Mon-Fri	One rate all day	7am-7pm Mon-Fri	7am-7pm Mon-Fri	7am-7pm Mon-Fri	7am-7pm Mon-Fri
All other times	One rate all day	All other times **(F)**	One rate all day	All other times	All other times	All other times	All other times
44	36	46	30	55	49	45	32.5
22	36	17 **(F)**	30	35	25	22.5	20
1	30	30	1	1	1	1	1
20	17 **(C)**	13 / 17 **(G)**	Free	20	20	20	20
5.5	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free
11	Free **(D)**	Free **(D)**	Free **(D)**	Free	Free	Free	Free
11	Free **(D)**	Free **(D)**	Free **(D)**	Free	Free	Free	Free
25	22	22	22	20	20	20	20
Calls to other Telstra mobiles: peak 33 cents/30 seconds, off-peak 2.5 cents/30 seconds, SMS 12.5 cents Mon–Fri noon–2pm	Accumulate free minutes when you recharge **(E)**	Off-peak Vodafone to Vodafone calls 3.5 cents per 30 seconds. Local and national calls to landline phones 15 cents per 30 seconds off-peak		Virgin to Virgin SMS 10 cents. 'Rave rate' 15 cents per 30 seconds to a nominated number	Virgin to Virgin SMS 10 cents. 'Rave rate' 15 cents per 30 seconds to a nominated number	Virgin to Virgin SMS 10 cents. 'Rave rate' 15 cents per 30 seconds to a nominated number	Virgin to Virgin SMS 10 cents. 'Rave rate' 15 cents per 30 seconds to a nominated number

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

While prepaid rates are finally becoming more competitive, services are getting more complex. Some networks are introducing more rates and options to choose from. There's not much difference between the plans in what you'll pay for SMS, but flagfall and other call rates do vary. Use our table to see how much you can save on peak and off-peak calls.

- **Flagfall:** The minimum amount you'll pay each time you make a call. The range across plans is 0 to 20 cents, with **VODAFONE No Plans Pre Paid** charging no flagfall.
- **Call increments:** Plans that charge for calls in one-second increments rather than 30 are better value — you don't pay for a 30-second block even if your call only lasts 10 seconds. Most companies advertise their rates per 30 seconds or per minute. Look carefully for their statement of how they charge.
- **Call rates:** There are two variations — prepaid plans either have a combination of peak and off-peak rates or one rate all day, every day. All plans with peak/off-peak charge peak rates between 7 am and 7 pm, Monday to Friday, and off-peak rates at all other times. The **cheapest call rate** (for 30 seconds) is **VODAFONE No Plans Pre Paid** at 30 cents — the plan charges a flat rate of one cent per second at all times, with no flagfall.
- **Voicemail: VIRGIN** and **VODAFONE** give free voicemail deposits and retrievals to prepaid customers. **TELSTRA Communic8 Off** and **On** have the most expensive voicemail charges.
- **SMS: VIRGIN As You Go** plans are the cheapest at 20 cents a message at all times.
- **Discounts:** Special deals on prepaid services usually have an expiry date, which is why it's better to choose your call plan based on call rates and flagfall rather than special offers. Specials and discounts on same-network calls and SMS should be the icing on the cake. The table shows current specials on offer.

Getting a good deal on AIR TRAVEL

How to get good value for your flight dollar, whether at bargain basement prices or for a little bit of luxury at not too high a price.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Shop around** — *prices can vary enormously from agent to agent.*
- **Keep a constant lookout** *for bargains well before you plan to travel.*
- **Beware false economies** *— late-night or early-morning flights may incur extra costs on the ground, while 35-hour horror trips that take a week to recover from may not be worth the savings.*

We've all seen the ads: flights to some popular destination at an amazingly low price — almost too good to be true. OK, it usually says *from* some amazingly low price, but your hopes are up.

So you give the agent a call, and it turns out there were only a limited number of places at that price and you've "just missed out"; it's valid only during the cyclone/blizzard/malaria season; the mere mention of the carrier reminds you it's time to update your will; or paying for seven nights' accommodation in a five-star Tokyo hotel is part of the deal.

Despite this, there are good deals to be had — you just need to know where and when to look, and have a little luck on your side.

GET IN EARLY

The cheapest seats for a flight tend to sell first, so the earlier you book, the better. There may be some last-minute specials for unsold seats, but it's a gamble. Keep in mind that the cheapest seats also tend to have more conditions attached — it's up to you to weigh up price versus flexibility.

BEING FLEXIBLE CAN STRETCH YOUR DOLLAR FURTHER

Varying your flights by a few hours, a few days or a few weeks — depending on where you're going — can bring costs down substantially if it takes you into non-peak periods.

Avoid rush hour

Peak business travel times for domestic flights are around 8 am and 5 pm. You might find more seats available and cheaper prices in the middle of the day or later in the evening, especially on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Monday afternoons, Friday mornings and Saturdays can also be good times to look (except around holidays).

One thing to keep in mind is that catching flights in the early morning or late evening may mean taking a taxi (rather than bus or train) or even overnight accommodation near the airport, so you'd have to make sure the savings on the airfare aren't offset by these extras.

'Tis the season for savings

Travelling in the low season or shoulder seasons (periods either side of the high and low seasons) can

save you hundreds of dollars. Seasons vary from destination to destination and may vary by the odd day to two between airlines, but for Europe and the US prices tend to peak around Christmas and northern hemisphere summer, with the low season in their late autumn and late winter.

Domestic flights and those to destinations close to Australia (such as Thailand, Bali, New Zealand and Fiji) tend to have higher fares around Australian school holidays, with a Christmas holiday peak.

As an example, the difference between high- and low-season fares with Qantas can be as much as $700 to Europe and $400 to the US. Delaying or bringing your trip forward a few days (into a shoulder season) can save you a couple of hundred dollars.

That doesn't help if your plans are inflexible, due to timing of holidays or Christmas commitments. But if you're setting off on a longer trip, it's worth looking at the seasons — especially if it's only a matter of a week or so's difference.

WHICH TRAVEL AGENTS ARE CHEAPEST?

We rang a number of different travel agents to enquire about flights from the east coast to London — a popular overseas destination from Australia. Flights were for the December high season (the three weeks before Christmas), and we rang in mid-May.

- The cheapest flight we found was with Royal Brunei, offered by a travel agent that specialises in travel to Britain. It's definitely worth trying specialists for your destination — they may not have the purchasing power of the big chains and online agents, but they're likely to be up-to-date on all the good deals currently available.
- The next-cheapest flights were with online travel agents, although when we checked for availability many at the lower prices had sold out — you have to get in fast. See *Online agents*, below, for more about booking online.
- There were no consistent differences between small independent agents and large chains.
- Buying direct from the airlines was the most expensive option, although it's still worth checking with them for specials.

The exercise demonstrated to us the importance of shopping around — if we were simply looking for the cheapest flight available, we could have spent anywhere between $1655 and $2072 (plus taxes), depending on which agent we rang.

ONLINE AGENTS

With easier access to the internet and improved security for financial transactions, researching and booking flights online is becoming more and more popular.

It can make it very easy to shop around — you can see all your options right there in front of you, and play around with different scenarios. And you can (but won't necessarily) save money, the rationale being there are fewer staff so lower overheads. Most also have people you can talk to, so you're not completely on your own if you get stuck or need some help.

The downside is that websites can be very slow and laborious, and it might take a lot longer than simply picking up the phone and ringing a few agents. This is partly due to the time taken to upload each page, but also because it might require some trial and error to find the right flight for you.

For added security and peace of mind, follow the same rules that apply to all internet shopping — see the CHOICE website (type 'online shopping' in the search box).

Domestic flights

Both Qantas and Virgin Blue have specials available only to people booking over the internet. Virgin Blue also offers discounts for booking regular tickets online. Prices vary according to the time of the flight (see *Avoid rush hour*, far left), so if your plans are flexible you can try a few different times and choose the time and price that suit you best. The Virgin Blue website is particularly useful in this respect, in that it lets you see at a glance all flights on the day you're interested in.

COMPARING APPLES WITH APPLES

There's a multitude of ways of presenting prices, which can make it difficult to compare.

- When we were researching this article in May and June, some prices were quoted inclusive of all taxes (GST on domestic flights, airport, Ansett and other taxes), some with GST but not other taxes, and some with no taxes. However, as of July 1, the ACCC requires all airlines, travel agents and internet travel sellers to include all taxes in any advertised airfares. While this makes it a lot easier to compare prices (and also gives a more realistic picture of the total cost of your ticket), keep in mind that the prices may still vary slightly due to fluctuating exchange rates, new taxes and so on.

If you see an advertised price that doesn't include all taxes, contact the ACCC on 1300 302 502.

- One of the online booking agents we checked also adds a 6% **commission**, which isn't included in the fare initially displayed.
- For online domestic fares, check whether the fare is **one-way or return**: the one-way price may be given even if you've asked for a return fare.

CHECK THE FINE PRINT

Before you sign up to any deal, make sure you know what the conditions are. Some of the main things to consider are as follows:

- When does the offer apply? Prices vary according to season, so that great offer might not apply when you want to fly.
- To whom does it apply? Some fares are only for students, people under 26 or seniors. There are also 'companion' fares for two people travelling together, where one person pays full price with a discount for the second, or both pay a discounted price.
- How much are children charged, and at what ages do they change from infants to children and children to adults? Rules vary from airline to airline.
- How long is the ticket valid for? Many tickets have time limits for starting and/or finishing the journey.
- Are stopovers permitted? If so, how many are allowed and where are they? Are extra fees involved?
- Does the route suit your needs (with regard to stopovers and avoiding unnecessary travel time)?
- If you're required to make a long or overnight transit stop, is the cost of accommodation included in the ticket price (or available at a discount price)?
- Are there any charges for changing your itinerary (either from the airline or the agent)?
- Are there any bonuses, such as a free side trip, discount car hire, etc?
- Can you buy extra flight legs, and for how much?
- Is the fare contingent on you buying a certain value of land content in addition to the airfare (for example, paying a minimum of $150 towards hotel accommodation or car hire)?
- When do you have to pay? Many bargain flights require payment well in advance of the flight.
- If you have to cancel your ticket at some stage, how much will you lose?

If you're booking on the internet, with no-one to explain the conditions to you, they can be very confusing, especially if you're not a frequent traveller and aren't familiar with the terminology. Even frequent travellers can be stumped by some of the abbreviations used on the conditions.

If you're in any doubt, ask for help — the sites we looked at offered a phone or internet-based help service (see *Some useful websites*, page 18).

WHAT SACRIFICES *AREN'T* YOU PREPARED TO MAKE FOR THE PRICE?

If you're travelling on a budget, you'll obviously not get the comfort and service of first or business class. But there are ways you can make your journey more bearable without a lot of (if any) extra cost by choosing one of the better airlines.

CHOICE Travel recently reported on readers' impressions of airlines, and the best-rated included Air New Zealand, Singapore Airlines, Emirates, SAS and Thai. For that all-important legroom, Air New Zealand came top, but the others also rated well. Cathay Pacific, Malaysia Airlines and Swissair rated quite well overall, but not as highly as the others for legroom. (There's a website with seat pitch for various international airlines listed in *Some useful websites*).

At the other end of the scale were Air France, Olympic Airways, Alitalia and Iberia, which were among those that rated below average. Egyptair was one of the lowest, with less than 50% of people willing to recommend it to friends.

Overseas holidays — a statistical snapshot

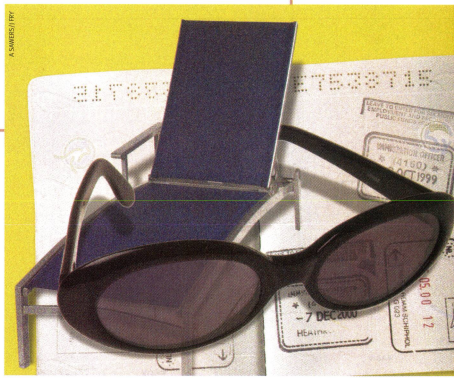
17.5% of Australians went overseas in 1999-2000. 45% of these trips, accounting for 1.5 million people, were for holidays.

- **Most travelled:** 22% of West Australians took an overseas trip.
- **Least travelled:** Only 6.6% of Tasmanians went overseas (and no, that doesn't include to the mainland).
- **Most improved:** The number of Queenslanders travelling overseas for a holiday almost doubled from 10 years previously.
- **Biggest spenders:** New South Welshies, with an average of $4358 per person per trip.
- **Top 10 destinations:**

Indonesia (including Bali)	Fiji
New Zealand	Malaysia
USA	Singapore
UK	Hong Kong
Thailand	Italy

- 54% of holidaymakers were **women**. The only countries for which the number of male travellers exceeded females were New Zealand and Thailand.
- The median **age** of holiday travellers (the age at which half the people are older and half are younger) was 38.
- Among travellers to the top 10 destinations, Fiji had the youngest median age at 33.6.
- Travellers to Singapore had the oldest median age (43.8).

(Statistics for 1999-2000 courtesy of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.)



THERE'S LONG-HAUL AND LONNNNNG-HAUL ...

Long-haul flights to Europe and the US are already long enough without having to add to the ordeal with numerous or long stops between legs. You may save a few hundred dollars, but arrive exhausted and waste a few precious days recovering.

For example, with Qantas/BA it's about 23 hours from Sydney to London, with one generally short stop on the way. With Garuda, via Bali, Jakarta and Frankfurt, it's 35 hours — but you save almost $500 in the high season. And a flight from Melbourne to New York can take as little as 22 hours with Qantas or around 35 hours with Korean Air. However, you can save $400 flying with Korean in the high season.

AFFORDABLE LUXURY

If the thought of a long-haul flight cramped in economy class is more than you can bear, there are some more comfortable options that are cheaper than regular business or first-class fares.

- **Premium economy**

Some airlines have economy-class seating that offers more legroom than regular economy class. For example, for trips to and from London, British Airways World Traveller Plus class gives you seats with more leg and elbow room than regular economy class. You pay more than you would for regular economy (up to $600 more), but it's cheaper than business class.

Air France, Eva Air, Garuda, United Airlines and Virgin Atlantic also offer premium economy services on some routes.

- **Mixed-class fares**

Another luxury option offered by some airlines is mixed-class fares, where you fly economy class for one leg (say Australia to Japan) and business class for the second leg to Europe. For example, we found a mixed-class high-season deal with Qantas and SAS which cost $700 more than going economy class the whole way. So for less than a full business-class fare, you get room to stretch out (and sleep) on the longest part of the flight.

- **Discount business class**

Discounts on business-class seats may be offered by some airlines for seniors and for two people travelling together (companion fares).

WHEN YOU GET THERE ...

If you're planning to travel around a lot and cover large distances, it might be worth your while looking into

options before you leave. Your main choices are as follows:

- Rail and road. **Rail passes** can be cheaper than buying individual tickets, but often have to be arranged outside the country you want to travel in. You might get a good deal on a **rental car** if you organise it from home, or as part of a fly-drive package.
- Check out **air passes**, especially for North and South America. These are particularly useful if you want to hop from place to place with one-way flights.
- Many European carriers offer **side trips**, either free or for a set price, once you get to Europe. This most likely operates via the airline's hub (for example, Amsterdam for KLM or Vienna for Lauda Air), so you fly out and back into the same place each time. Look out for open-jaw options, where you can fly out to one city and back from another and travel overland in between.
- There are many short-haul **discount airlines** operating in Europe and the US, so it's worth finding out which ones can get you where you want to go (see *Some useful websites*, right).

WHERE TO FIND THE SPECIALS

Having email and/or access to the internet certainly makes it a lot easier to find out about special deals.

- Check travel websites regularly — many highlight hot deals or specials (see *Some useful websites*).
- Sign up for email newsletters, which will alert you to any special deals (sometimes deals that last only a few hours). Both Qantas and Virgin Blue have regular newsletters and price alerts, and you can sign up from their websites.

Other places to find out about good deals are the travel sections of the weekend papers, or even in the windows of travel agencies.

The main thing is to stay on the lookout — deals come and go quickly, and getting a cheap flight can be more a matter of good luck than design. ■

Some useful websites

If you can access the internet, either from home, work, your local library or an internet café, these sites could be useful when you're researching your holiday.

- **Seat pitch** (the distance between rows of seats) in major airlines. In inches only, but useful for purposes of comparison: www.travelleronline.com/planner/airnews.shtml.
- **Online flight bookings**. We used these sites for our research, and you might find them useful. You can also sign up for their email newsletters alerting you of any special deals.

www.qantas.com.au
www.virginblue.com.au
www.travel.com.au
www.bestflights.com.au
www.webjet.com.au

- **Glossary of travel terms**: www.travel.com.au/help/glossary.htm.
- **Cheap 'no frills' airlines in the UK and Europe:**

www.buzzaway.com
www.easyjet.com
www.go-fly.com
www.ryanair.com
www.virgin-express.com

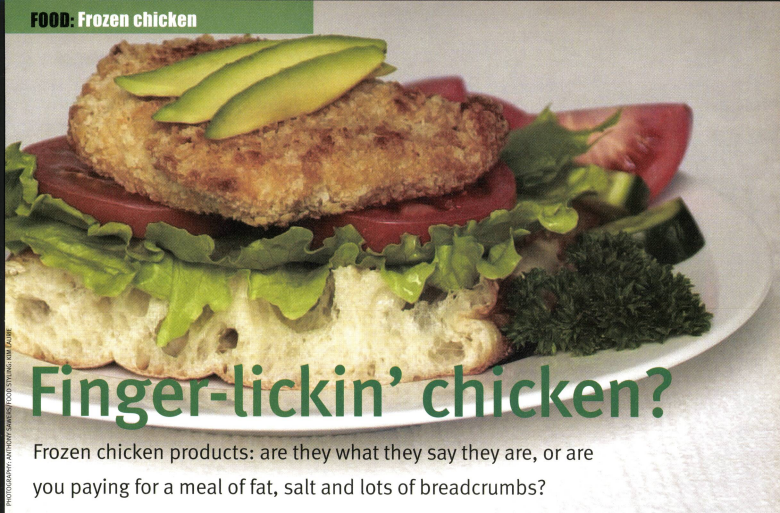
- **Finding cheap flights in the US**

Our sister organisation in the US put six of the biggest online discount flight agents to the test, and found prices can vary by hundreds of dollars. Their advice was to use these sites for looking up prices, and compare them with those direct from the airlines or from a travel agent. The sites evaluated were:

www.cheaptickets.com
www.expedia.com
www.onetravel.com
www.travelnow.com
www.travelocity.com
www.orbitz.com

Some airlines worth trying are:

www.jetblue.com
www.airtran.com
www.nwa.com (Northwest Airlines)
www.delta.com



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANTHONY SAMUELS/FOOD STYLING: KIM ALLAN

Finger-lickin' chicken?

Frozen chicken products: are they what they say they are, or are you paying for a meal of fat, salt and lots of breadcrumbs?

Healthy, quick meals are the order of the day for many people, but many of the frozen meals you find at the supermarket are high-fat, high-salt nutritional nightmares. Lean, skinless chicken can form the basis of a nutritious low-fat meal, but what about the ready-to-cook chicken products from the supermarket freezer?

FAT, SALT AND A LITTLE MORE FAT

Unfortunately, you won't find many low-fat meals here, especially among most of the products coated in crumbs. There are some exceptions, but generally once the crumbs go on, up goes the fat. However, the fat and sodium contents vary widely within the different types of frozen chicken (fillets, medallions, nuggets, tenders, etc), so it's worth looking in our table (page 21) for low-fat, low-salt versions of your favourite type.

Not surprisingly, the uncoated chicken breast products tested are significantly lower in fat than most, although **STEGGLES Char Grilled Chicken Breast Fillet Oven Roasted** and **STEGGLES Char Grilled Chicken Breast Fillet Cajun** are very high in salt, supplying a large proportion of the 2300 mg upper daily limit for adults. **INGHAM Lite Chicken Breast Fillets Garlic, Lemon and Herb** are a good choice, with only 1.3 g fat per serve and 353 mg sodium. Add some salad or veges and you've got a convenient and healthy meal.

Chicken nuggets and many of the snack-style products popular with kids are quite high in fat, and few are made from whole pieces of chicken (see *Whole, formed or manufactured?*, page 20). With some of these products you're also getting a fair whack of the recommended intake of sodium for children. As an occasional quick dinner perhaps once a week, served with salad or veges, it's OK to give them to kids, but they shouldn't become a staple in their diet. See *Just for comparison*, page 20, for the difference serving them with veges instead of chips makes. The **INGHAM Lite Chicken Breast Medallions** are probably the best choice, as they're low in fat and salt.

Keep in mind too that the nutrition information in the table, with the exception of the nuggets from **McDONALD'S, KFC** and **RED ROOSTER**, is for products that are oven-baked or grilled, without the addition of extra fat. If you shallow- or deep-fry them, the fat content will increase further.

HOW MUCH CHICKEN FOR YOUR DOLLAR?

Price doesn't seem to be much of an indicator of how much chicken filling a product has. These products aren't that cheap compared to buying raw breast fillets or tenderloins, so you want to be sure you're paying for filling rather than breadcrumbs.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Are frozen chicken** *products a healthy dinner option? See* Fat, salt and a little more fat, *left.*
- **Is that chicken breast** *really breast or 'formed' meat? And what's the difference? We had them analysed to see if you get what you think you're paying for — see page 21.*

You can generally see the difference between whole chicken pieces (left) and those made from 'formed' or 'manufactured' chicken. See below for more on this.

The filling can include not only chicken but also marinade, binders, other flavourings and water. Check out the '% filling' column in the table to compare how much filling vs coating you get for each product.

The uncoated products are comparable in price to some of the coated ones, but have a much higher percentage of filling, so you're getting more chicken for your dollar and much less fat as well.

Of course you could just buy some chicken fillets and prepare them yourself. The cost wouldn't be much different and they're quite quick to cook. If you take a little care with what you add to them, coat them in and how you cook them, there's a good chance you'll get a lower-fat, lower-salt meal.

WHOLE, FORMED OR MANUFACTURED?

We wanted to find out if products labelled as chicken breast were in fact breast meat or formed meat. What's the difference?

- Chicken defined as 'whole' is a complete portion of chicken, usually breast.
- 'Formed' chicken is small pieces of chicken meat that are forced together with binders and marinades to form a particular shape of chicken that closely resembles a whole piece of chicken.
- 'Manufactured' chicken is meat from any part of the chicken that's pulverised and generally mixed with a cereal binder before being compressed into a shape. It usually has a minced appearance. Manufactured chicken may well be fattier, as it could include skin and fat as well. ■

INGREDIENTS:
Chicken 57%, water, flour (wheat, corn), vegetable oil (cottonseed), salt, sugar, mineral salt (451), yeast, gluten, thickener (1404), vegetable gum (412), paprika oleo resin, spice, spice extracts, flavours,oats, barley, rice, soya, chickpeas, split peas, navy beans, linola seeds, sesame seeds, millet, mung beans, rye, triticale, vinegar, emulsifier (471, 481, 472e), preservatives (282, 262), vitamins (thiamin, niacin, folate), minerals (iron).

May contain traces of nuts, dairy products, eggs or seeds.

THE THINGS YOU FIND...

- *Our analyst found some feathers in the INGHAM Mini Drums. This could be because it's a coated section of chicken wing that may not have been plucked completely.*
- *Although the STEGGLES Nuggets don't claim to be 'chicken' nuggets, we think it's what most people would expect: in fact they're chicken and turkey nuggets. Not that there's anything wrong with turkey meat, but it would be better if the real contents were made more obvious.*

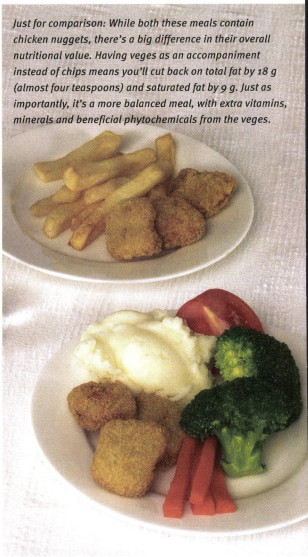
HUH?

Thought you were just buying a piece of chicken covered in crumbs? This amazing ingredients list comes from **INGHAM Chicken Breast Tenders,** although we do have to give them credit for disclosure of all ingredients. Others may just state 'vegetable powder'.

WHAT WE TESTED

We bought every frozen chicken product we could find in supermarkets, excluding products with an additional filling, such as Chicken Kiev or Cordon Bleu. (Those products push the nutritional envelope even further, as they generally contain extra-high-fat fillings, such as butter and cheese, and are coated to boot. Best to leave them as an occasional treat.) The products were analysed to determine what sort of chicken was used, and we calculated the percentage of filling compared to coating.

We also bought three samples of fast-food outlet nuggets to see how they compare. Keep in mind that these products are already deep-fried, so their fat content is higher than the other uncooked nuggets, which you can bake or grill without adding fat.



Just for comparison: While both these meals contain chicken nuggets, there's a big difference in their overall nutritional value. Having veges as an accompaniment instead of chips means you'll cut back on total fat by 18 g (almost four teaspoons) and saturated fat by 9 g. Just as importantly, it's a more balanced meal, with extra vitamins, minerals and beneficial phytochemicals from the veges.

Product (in order of % filling, within groups)	% Filling	Recommended or average serve size (g)	Fat per serve (g)	Sodium per serve (mg)	Type of chicken*	Size of pack (g)	Price paid for pack ($)**
FILLET							
INGHAM Lite Chicken Breast Fillets Garlic, Lemon & Herbs **(A)**	99	90 (1 fillet)	1.3	353	Whole	180	5.97
STEGGLES Char Grilled Chicken Breast Fillet Oven Roasted **(A) (B)**	96	180 (1 fillet)	3.2	1638	Whole	360	6.99
STEGGLES Char Grilled Chicken Breast Fillet Cajun **(A) (B)**	93	180 (1 fillet)	3.2	1764	Whole	360	6.99
STEGGLES Lite & Tasty Chicken Breast Steaks Traditional **(B)**	73	110 (1 steak)	3.9	1078	Whole	440	6.65
STEGGLES Lite & Tasty Chicken Breast Steaks Lemon & Coriander **(B)**	72	110 (1 steak)	3.9	726	Whole	440	6.99
BLACK & GOLD Cooked & Crumbed Chicken Breast Fillets	70	80 (1 fillet)	6.2	355	Whole	400	5.70
INGHAM Chicken Breast Steaks	52	100 (1 steak)	9.8	246	Formed	400	6.17
INGHAM Golden Spice Chicken Breasts	52	100 (1 steak)	11.2	480	Whole	400	5.49
INGHAM Chicken Schnitzels	32	200 (1 schnitzel)	18.0	873	Formed	400	4.29
BURGERS							
INGHAM Char-Marked Chicken Burgers	77	69 (1 burger)	8.1	603	Manufactured	400	5.19
BIRDS EYE Chicken Burgers	63	75 (1 burger)	13.5	303	Manufactured	300	3.39
NUGGETS AND MEDALLIONS							
INGHAM Lite Chicken Breast Medallions	81	82 (3 medallions)	2.3	229	Manufactured	400	4.20
FARMLAND Chicken Nuggets	65	100 (5 nuggets)	16.1	625	Manufactured	500	3.80
HOME BRAND Chicken Nuggets	65	100 (5 nuggets)	14.0	1035	Manufactured	500	3.08
KFC Chicken Nuggets	65	88 (6 nuggets)	13.8 **(D)**	537	Manufactured	88	4.20
McDONALD'S Chicken Nuggets	65	108 (6 nuggets)	17.7 **(D)**	484	Formed	110	3.75
HILLENDALE Chicken Nuggets	63	100 (5 nuggets)	16.1	625	Manufactured	500	3.80
INGHAM Chicken Nuggets	63	100 (5 nuggets)	16.1	625	Manufactured	500	6.11
INGHAM Honey & Sesame Chicken Breast Medallions	61	93 (3 medallions)	10.5	278	Formed	400	6.38
INGHAM Teriyaki Chicken Breast Medallions	61	93 (3 medallions)	10.3	598	Formed	400	6.49
CHICKADEE Chicken Nuggets	60	100 (5 nuggets)	18.5	600	Manufactured	750	5.59
SAVINGS Chicken Nuggets	59	100 (5 nuggets)	16.1	375	Manufactured	500	3.08
RED ROOSTER Chicken Nuggets	57	144 (8 nuggets)	31.4 **(D)**	871	Manufactured	110	4.30
IGA Chicken Nuggets	55	100 (5 nuggets)	17.3	704	Manufactured	500	5.56
STEGGLES Nuggets **(B)**	49	100 (5 nuggets)	9.9	770	Manufactured	500	4.50
BLACK & GOLD Cooked & Crumbed Chicken Nuggets	48	100 (5 nuggets)	15.3	790	Manufactured	500	3.85
SNACK-STYLE							
BIRDS EYE Crispy Chicken Tempters	83	27 (1 tempter)	4.6	184	Formed	325	4.99
INGHAM Chicken Strips	71	30 (1 strip)	3.8	207	Manufactured	360	6.17
STEGGLES Chicken Crunchy Fastbreaks Honey Sesame	62	40 (1 fastbreak)	3.4	252	Formed	350	5.29
BIRDS EYE Crumbed Chicken Bush Buddies	56	31 (1 bush buddie)	3.9	161	Manufactured	375	4.67
INGHAM Chicken Munchies	54	85 (10 munchies)	13.4	635	Manufactured	500	6.33
STEGGLES Chick 'n Tater Bites Cheese	53	220 (10 bites)	12.0	900	Manufactured	400	3.79
STEGGLES Chick 'n Tater Bites Corn	52	220 (10 bites)	11.0	460	Manufactured	400	3.79
BIRDS EYE Crumbed Chicken Fingers	51	27 (1 finger)	3.5	62	Manufactured	375	4.09
BIRDS EYE Teriyaki Chicken Bites	51	100 (10 bites)	11.4	753	Manufactured	325	4.99
INGHAM Chicken Chipees Original Chicken	51	100 (11 chipees)	18.4	620	Manufactured	400	5.03
STEGGLES Chicken Crunchy Fastbreaks Spicy Nachos	51	40 (1 fastbreak)	5.1	248	Formed	350	5.29
INGHAM Chicken Chipees Tasty Cheese	48	100 (11 chipees)	20.6	939	Manufactured	400	4.73
INGHAM Golden Spice Chicken Breast Appetizers	44	40 (1 appetizer)	4.5	208	Whole	400	6.09
INGHAM Chicken Mini Drums	36 **(C)**	60 (1 mini drum)	8.0	329	Whole (wing)	600	5.97
TENDERS							
INGHAM Lite Chicken Breast Tenders	73	77 (1 tender)	0.7	284	Whole	400	5.65
FARMLAND Chicken Breast Tenders	68	78 (1 tender)	6.4	195	Whole	400	5.49
INGHAM Chicken Breast Tenders	53	67 (1 tender)	7.4	596	Formed	400	6.18
INGHAM Honey & Soy Chicken Breast Tenders	52	67 (1 tender)	6.8	145	Formed	400	6.18

* *For an explanation of this, see* Whole, formed or manufactured?, *far left.*

** *The price we paid in April 2002; you may find variations.*

(A) *No crumbed coating.*

(B) *Steggles says these will be reformulated later this year.*

(C) *The percentage of filling shown doesn't include the bone.*

(D) *See* What we tested, *far left.*

Brands you can count on

You'll never have the luxury of being 100% confident your new appliance won't break down. But choosing a reliable brand could save you time, hassle and money.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Expensive appliances aren't always more reliable,** *as our latest survey shows.*
- **Of the appliances covered this time,** *dishwashers showed the biggest variation in brand reliability. Choose your brand carefully to avoid repair costs and hassle.*
- **For the first time** *we have reliability information on DVD players.*

Choosing which brand to buy isn't always easy. Our product tests can help you make sure the product does what it's supposed to, while our advice on *What to look for* can help cut through the gimmicks and jargon. But another major aspect of a product's usefulness is its reliability, which, due to constraints on time and resources, we can't realistically test in our labs.

This is where you come in: by filling in our appliance reliability survey, you give other potential buyers valuable information on a brand's reliability after it's been put to everyday use around the home.

It's a regular inclusion in CHOICE, and each time we focus on different appliances. This time we've reported on your experiences with microwaves, dishwashers, air conditioners, clothes dryers, vacuum cleaners and, for the first time, DVD players.

If the appliance you're interested in isn't covered here, see our last article in CHOICE, March 2000, which covered washing machines, fridges, TVs, VCRs and lawnmowers. Plus we reprint the reliability ratings each time we publish a test of the appliances.

Clothes dryers

Clothes dryers are a pretty reliable appliance, with 93% of respondents' dryers needing no repairs in the previous 12 months and a correspondingly high loyalty rate (on average 94% said they'd buy the same brand again).

The most common reasons for not wanting to buy a brand again were related to performance, rather than reliability, including: it takes too long to dry clothes (32% of those who wouldn't buy again), poor performance generally (24%) and too noisy (20%).

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(Differences of 4% or more are meaningful.)

ALL CLOTHES DRYERS (3608)	93
Hoover (1139)	97
Fisher & Paykel (1131)	94
Simpson (920)	90

PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN

ALL CLOTHES DRYERS (3662)	94
Fisher & Paykel (1148)	96
Hoover (1149)	95
Simpson (940)	92

The survey

The questionnaire went to 50,000 randomly selected CHOICE subscribers, and we received more than 12,000 replies. Thanks to everyone who took part. We wanted to know about six appliances: what brand they were and when you'd bought them; whether they'd needed repairing in the previous 12 months; what the problems were; and whether you'd buy the brand again.

Age matters

When we calculated the repair percentages for each appliance, we only included models bought in the last eight years. Other factors — such as usage — are likely to play a large part in the reliability of older machines.

Subscribers own appliances of varying ages, and so that this doesn't unfairly penalise or advantage any particular brand (older models are generally more likely to break down than new ones), we've age-adjusted the figures for each brand.

Real, not chance differences

Where it says, "Differences of x% or more between brands are meaningful", this means there were enough responses for us to be statistically confident that differences of 'x% or more' weren't caused by chance.

For greater statistical confidence, brands with fewer than 100 responses were excluded from the analysis, except for DVDs, where the cut-off was 50. The number of responses is noted in brackets after each brand.

Problems reported

For some appliances, we've listed specific problems that subscribers reported for a particular brand significantly more often than the average for all brands.

We've only given this kind of information about appliances up to three years old, and we've included all respondents who reported the problem, not just those who'd had their appliance repaired.

Brand loyalty

There are many reasons why people aren't happy with a particular brand (or model) of appliance, such as poor performance, a lack of particular features, difficulties getting parts or service, high purchase cost or poor reliability. So this explains why a very reliable brand isn't always more popular or an unreliable brand is rather more popular than you'd expect when people are asked if they'd buy it again.

We asked those who said they wouldn't buy a certain brand again why, and where there were some clear issues we've reported them.

ANTHONY SAMUELS

Microwaves

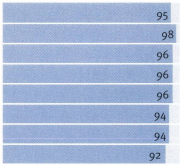
Overall microwaves seem quite reliable — only 5% had to be repaired in the 12 months before the survey. There isn't a great deal of difference between brands, with a range of only 6% between the most and least reliable.

The most common problems were the door latch (4%) and oven light (4%) — and unlike many other appliances, you often can't change the light yourself. Among microwaves bought in the last three years, **SANYO** owners reported significantly more problems with their door latch (8%) than owners of other models.

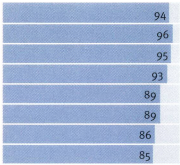
Not surprisingly for an appliance with such high reliability, nearly all respondents (94%) said they'd buy the same brand of microwave again. Among those who wouldn't, the most common reasons given were poor performance (20%) and bad controls (17%).

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(Differences of 5% or more between brands are meaningful)



PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



Dishwashers

Dishwashers were the least reliable appliance in this survey, with close to one in every seven machines having been repaired in the previous 12 months. There's some difference between brands, with a range of 17% between the most and least reliable.

The most common problems reported were with controls or switches (7%) and the door springs, hinges, latches and seals (5%). For dishwashers up to three years old, subscribers reported the following problems significantly more often than average for these brands:

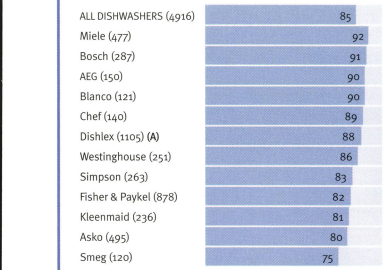
- Leaking: **BLANCO** (8%), **SIMPSON** (8%) and **FISHER & PAYKEL** (4%).
- Spray arm: **CHEF** (3%).
- Controls or switches: **FISHER & PAYKEL** (8%).
- Hoses/outlet: **FISHER & PAYKEL** (3%).
- Basket or racks: **FISHER & PAYKEL** (5%)
- Noise or vibration: **SIMPSON** (5%) and **WESTINGHOUSE** (4%).
- Timer: **SMEG** (6%).

Most respondents (83%) said they'd buy the same brand again. However, this loyalty is slightly lower than for most other appliances in this survey, perhaps indicating respondents are less satisfied in general with this appliance. The most common reasons for not buying a brand again were poor performance (38% of those who wouldn't), too noisy (27%) and inconvenient shelving (25%).

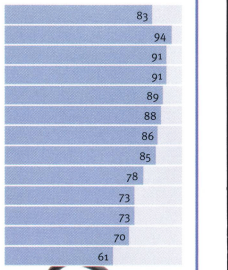
Despite its relatively low reliability, 89% of **ASKO** owners said they'd buy the brand again. Among those who wouldn't, the main reasons were that it breaks down too often (32%), it's too expensive (18%) and poor service (13%).

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(Differences of 8% or more between brands are meaningful.)



PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



(A) *Includes Vulcan Dishlex models*

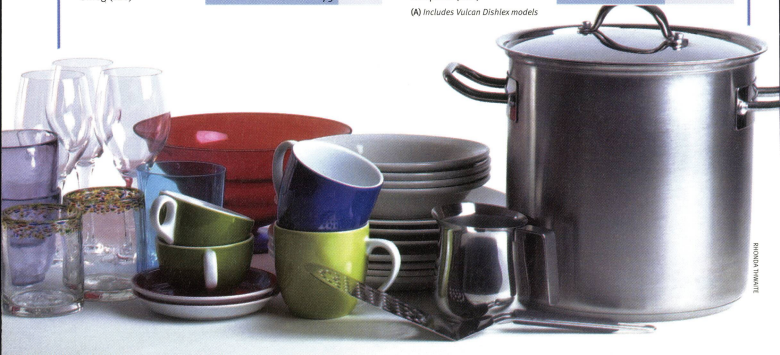


PHOTO: THINKSTOCK

Air conditioners

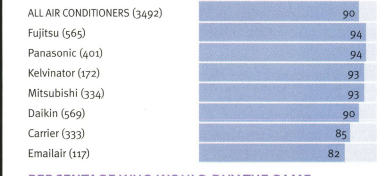
All types of reverse-cycle air conditioner were included in the survey. The most popular type was a split system (60%), followed by ducted air conditioning (23%) and wall/window units (16%). Last time we looked at air conditioner reliability, wall or window units were the most popular, which shows how consumer preferences have changed in the past five years.

Wall/window units were the most reliable in the current survey (94% not needing repair), followed by split systems (92%). Ducted air conditioning systems were found to have the poorest reliability, with 84% not needing repair.

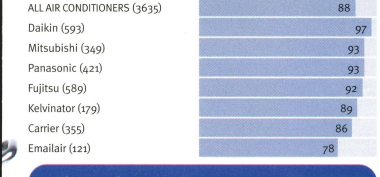
There's a significant difference between the most and the least reliable brands, indicating that for this appliance, brand matters. People who own an **EMAILAIR** reported more problems with controls than average (8%), and were least likely to want to buy the brand again.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(Differences of 5% or more are meaningful.)



PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



What about LG?

LG is a popular brand, but because it's relatively new, we couldn't include it in our main brand tables (except for DVDs, where they're all newish).

However, we were able to look at LG microwaves, air conditioners and vacuum cleaners separately within a shorter age bracket (appliances bought in or after 1998) to see how they compare with recent models of other brands.

The result? The reliability of LG products was about average for each of these appliances.

GEOFF AMBLER

DVDs

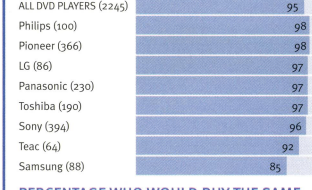
DVD players only recently appeared on the market compared with most other appliances, but seem to have been adopted with enthusiasm: 19% of respondents had bought one in the two years before the survey. As it's a relatively new appliance, we only looked at reliability for players purchased in those two years, and haven't made statistical adjustments for age. So, while their reliability (95% not needing repair in the previous 12 months) seems high, it's not directly comparable with other appliances as all the DVD players are so new.

Playing problems were the most common, particularly among owners of **SAMSUNG** and **TEAC** machines (19% and 17% respectively reporting this).

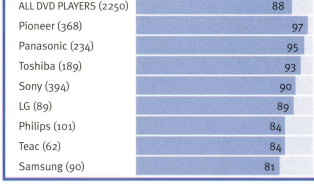
The main reason given for not wanting to buy the brand again was poor performance (35% of those who wouldn't).

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(Differences of 8% or more are meaningful.)



PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



Vacuum cleaners

The most popular type of vacuum cleaner is the barrel, with just over half (53%) of respondents using one, compared with 25% who own an upright. There was virtually no difference between them in terms of reliability (90% and 88% respectively).

However, there was a big difference between **WERTHEIM**, at the bottom of the list, and most other brands, with a range of 15% between the most and least reliable.

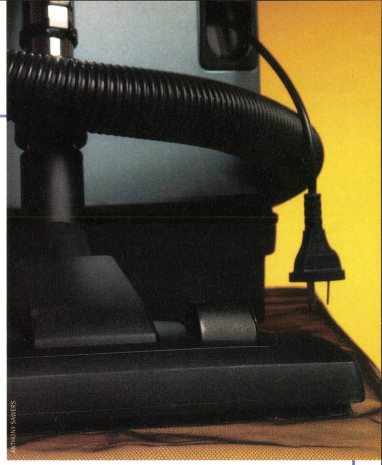
For vacuum cleaners up to three years old, subscribers reported problems significantly more often than average for these brands:

- **WERTHEIM**: Drive belt (6%) and cord retraction (7%).
- **HOOVER**: Drive belt (6%).
- **VOLTA**: Dust indicator (4%).
- **SANYO**: Blocked suction (10%), heads (10%), wand (9%), cord retraction (8%) and dust indicator (7%).
- **MODERN DAY**: Heads (23%), blocked suction (15%), hose (15%), filters (5%).
- **VAX**: Suction (7%).

Brand loyalty for vacuum cleaners was the lowest for all appliances in this survey: close to a quarter of respondents said they wouldn't buy the same brand again. The most common reasons people gave for not buying a brand again were poor performance (32%), poor suction (28%), dustbag problems (22%), noise (19%) and too expensive (15%).

For the brands that rated lower than average for loyalty:

- For **MODERN DAY** owners the most common reason was poor performance (41%).



ANTHONY WIERES

- Reasons for not buying **KIRBY**, which was about average for reliability, were that it's too expensive (91%), expensive to repair (20%) and difficult to get serviced (11%).
- **SANYO** owners also said they wouldn't buy because of poor performance (48%) and poor suction (45%).
- **WERTHEIM** owners were more likely to cite reliability reasons — breaks down too often (17%), expensive to repair (11%) and poor service (8%) — and that they're too expensive (41%).

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(Differences of 5% or more are meaningful.)

ALL VACUUM CLEANERS (7262)	90
Nilfisk (398)	95
Vax (294)	95
Hitachi (134)	94
Miele (454)	94
Panasonic (546)	93
Modern Day (132)	92
Sanyo (382)	92
Dyson (373)	91
Philips (116)	91
Volta (940)	91
Kirby (126)	90
Hoover (1103)	89
Electrolux (448)	87
Wertheim (633)	80

PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN

ALL VACUUM CLEANERS (7216)	76
Nilfisk (401)	88
Dyson (371)	87
Miele (455)	83
Philips (118)	80
Vax (291)	80
Hoover (1097)	79
Volta (936)	79
Panasonic (547)	78
Electrolux (445)	77
Hitachi (130)	75
Wertheim (633)	71
Sanyo (377)	63
Kirby (124)	55
Modern Day (125)	51

word on the street

The buzz on what's new and happening in the marketplace

BIOMETRIC PASSPORTS FOR AUSSIES?

Legislation under consideration by the US Congress would require all countries that don't need a visa to visit the US (which includes Australia) to introduce biometric identifiers in passports in order to keep their 'visa waiver' status.

Biometrics technology, which uses information such as fingerprints, retinal scans and facial recognition to identify people, may help improve security at airports worldwide. However, critics say the system's not foolproof, and there are serious implications for privacy. If the legislation is passed, Aussie passports will need to be 'biometrically enabled', machine-readable and tamper-proof by October 2003.

Other countries, such as the UK, are also considering introducing biometric data in passports in the next few years. Iris scanning is currently being trialled at Heathrow and Schipol (Amsterdam) airports to speed check-in procedures for frequent flyers. However, it's an airline initiative, and doesn't involve changes to passports.

Computing on the move

Mobile phones, portable computers, wireless keyboards — pretty soon someone will decide that what we really need is a portable toaster for brekkie on the go. Looming closer on the horizon is the **PHILIPS Detachable Monitor**, a wireless device that allows you to access and work on files, surf the net and answer emails from up to 100 metres from your host computer — ideal if your job means moving from place to place around the building.

You can also read electronic books and play music on it, and even hook up a mouse and keyboard if you don't want to be restricted to writing using the touch screen and handwriting recognition. In fact, you could think of it as the world's biggest pocket PC rather than simply a detachable monitor.

Weighing just 1 kg and capable of running for up to five hours without recharging the battery, the detachable monitor will give you some freedom, although whether it can compete with a run-of-the-mill laptop remains to be seen. It's due to be released some time this year, but as yet there's no scheduled date for Australia.

Walking on air

Sitting for long periods of time, as you would on a long-haul flight or a long bus or car ride, increases the risk of deep-vein thrombosis (DVT). But taking short occasional walks is said to decrease the risk — easy enough if you're in the car and can take a break, but not so easy in the cramped confines of a bus or in economy class on a plane.

Our counterparts in the UK, *Which?* magazine, reported on some inflatable foot cushions that aim to solve the problem, allowing you to 'walk' without leaving your seat. It sounds simple — you move your feet on top of the cushion, contracting and relaxing your calf muscles to keep blood circulating. They're light and compact when uninflated, ideal for popping into your hand luggage.

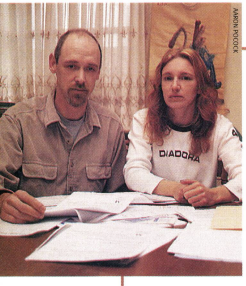
Medical experts and plane travellers put several of them to the test, and pronounced the **AIRWALKER** a clear winner. This is what they had to say:

"This is the only cushion [of the four that were assessed] that you can't misuse. You move air from the front to the back of the cushion rather than from side to side, ensuring you use your calf muscles. (With the other products, you can move the air by simply moving your thighs up and down, with little effect on blood flow.) It's tough and well made."

It costs $29.99 (including delivery) and can be ordered by credit card from Huntleigh Healthcare in Perth — phone 1800 072 040.

Another option, not tested by *Which?*, is the Australian **PUSH CUSH**, available from pharmacies and travel shops for around $20. Early testing on the cushion found that five minutes of foot pumping was equivalent to a 200 metre walk — not so easily done with 400 other passengers in an aircraft!

Have you seen or heard about something new and innovative you'd like us to investigate? We can't promise to check out everything you tell us about, but we'd love to know what attracts your interest. Email wots@choice.com.au, or see page 2 for other ways to contact us (please mark it to the attention of Word on the Street).



AARON PADDICK

Fine print strikes again

Chris and Michelle Mellios from Melbourne decided to refinance their existing mortgage to cover renovations. Chris describes their initial experience with RAMS as pleasant.

"We were told (in conversation and correspondence) that there would be no account-keeping fee for the life of the loan," says Chris.

The loan agreement and loan details made no mention of this, but contained a generic fees clause that said the company had the right to change existing fees or impose new fees without Chris and Michelle's consent.

Chris "went round in circles" for three weeks trying to have the contract changed to reflect the offer made in RAMS marketing. According to RAMS company secretary Martha Ryan, she told Chris the contract wouldn't be changed, but offered to send the couple a 'no account-keeping fee' guarantee; RAMS also agreed to reduce the loan application fee. However, Chris and Michelle weren't happy with this and decided to look for an alternative lender.

Unfortunately such blanket clauses are common in loan contracts. They sometimes contradict advertised offers and promises made by sales reps. And many loan contracts include clauses that appear to give lenders unreasonable power to alter key terms and conditions, including fees and the loan period, without the agreement of the borrower.

Both the Victorian Consumer Credit Legal Service and the NSW Consumer Credit Legal Centre have been calling for the Uniform Consumer Credit Code (the national law covering the provision of credit) to be amended to outlaw such "unilateral change clauses". Contact one of these organisations if you come across examples of such contract conditions.

High time for better fee information

The Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) recently released a guide to good disclosure of transaction account fees.

It's supposed to help banks, credit unions and building societies follow five principles of good disclosure of relevant information when consumers are choosing accounts, when fees change, in a statement and prior to transactions.

Given that consumers have paid over $780 million in transaction fees in the past year, it's about time the industry improved its information about fees.

The guide is available from www.fido.asic.gov.au or by phoning 1300 300 630.

WHAT DOES THE PRIZE DISGUISE?

Insurance company customers were recently sent forms that looked distinctly like sweepstake entries. It appeared that all they had to do was fill in their bank account details and they were in with a chance to win.

What the form didn't make clear was that they were providing their bank account details so the insurer could take policy premiums directly from their bank accounts on an ongoing basis.

The Australian Banking Industry Ombudsman (ABIO), while not prepared to name the parties involved, recently resolved the case, saying a direct debit authority has to be unambiguous before a bank can act on it, and that consumers should watch out for disguised direct debit authorities or those that include unfair or unclear conditions.

If you receive correspondence of this kind or you've signed such a form, contact the ABIO. The bank may have to reverse the debit. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) may also be interested if you think you've been misled by the company that drafted such a document.

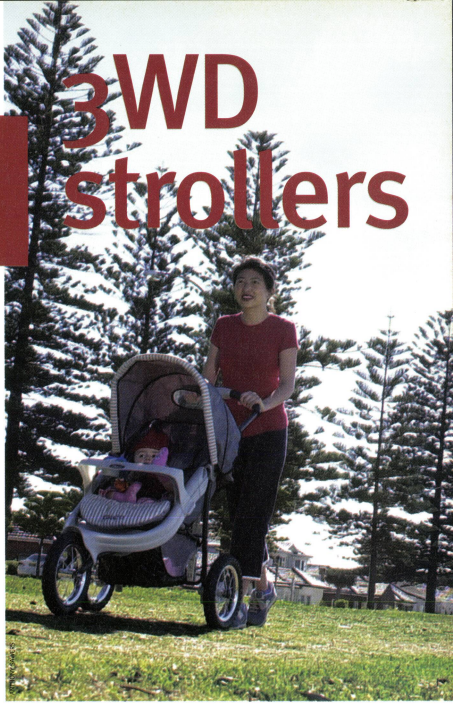
3WD strollers

On test

We tested 10 three-wheeled strollers priced from $240 to $500, checking them for safety according to the Australian standard for prams and strollers, and for durability. One of our durability tests was conducted at a faster speed than that in the standard, as these strollers are intended for jogging. And a panel of users road-tested them for us.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **During our tests** *the front wheel broke off the* ***KIWI Espresso****, and we found the* ***VALCO Marathon****'s seat isn't properly secured to its frame. See* What about the rest?, *page 31, for more, plus descriptions of lesser faults we found on tested models.*
- **Jogger strollers are good** *for active parents — our experienced jogger (see the photo, page 30) liked them — but our trialists didn't find them convenient for normal use (see* What parents thought, *page 30).*
- **CHOICE tests regularly find** *products that compromise child safety. The Australian standard for prams and strollers should be made mandatory, at least for safety, so that manufacturers would be legally obliged to comply.*



Three-wheeler or jogger strollers are bulky and tricky to get into a car, but good for jogging. Unfortunately, not all models are safe.

You don't have to jog with a three-wheeled stroller — they're fine for ordinary shopping and walking too, and they're currently the most popular type of stroller. But they're big and bulky, and the length of most tested models could make it easy to trip someone over in a shopping centre. They're also hard to get in and out of a medium-sized car boot (the **SWALLOW City Slicker** and **ROGER ARMSTRONG** didn't fit at all unless the wheels were removed).

But if you do want a jogger stroller (and obviously plenty of people do), our tests show which models are safe for your child and which aren't — the **KIWI Espresso** and **VALCO Marathon** aren't recommended (see *What about the rest?*, page 31, for why).

OK FOR ALL AGES?

Some manufacturers claim jogger strollers can be used for babies of any age, others that you shouldn't run or jog with a child younger than six months.

It seems sensible only to jog with this type of stroller with a child who can sit up on their own — jogging with a small baby in one, or perhaps even using it on rough terrain, could be harmful or at least uncomfortable, and these strollers lack the support a pram gives (even if the seat reclines).

WHAT TO BUY

These strollers passed all our safety tests and were rated as either 'good' or 'OK' by our trialists.

GRACO Esprit Leisure Air 3	$399
STEELCRAFT Swivel Jogger 36335 TEST BUY	$289
BABYLOVE Ranger BL08 TEST BUY	$239
MOUNTAIN BUGGY Breeze Single B1204-001	$459

Lance Thompson — second rower for the St George Illawarra NRL team and a Dad — said: "All were great on the straight. With the ones without swivel wheels you had to virtually stop to turn, but the ones with swivel let you maintain the same jogging speed." He also found the wrist straps helped control the stroller for jogging.

DO YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR?

A higher price didn't guarantee safety or good performance in our tests. The 10 tested models ranged from around $240 to $500, and only four passed all our safety tests, including the two cheapest (they're our Best Buys). Some of the more expensive models weren't rated well by trialists, or as safe by our expert tester.

WHAT PARENTS THOUGHT

A group of six mothers put the strollers through their paces walking a set course of concrete, grass, dirt and bark shavings, and rated them for things like going up and down stairs (see note 1, page 33, for more on the trial). Then our experienced jogger — Lance Thompson from the St George Illawarra Dragons rugby league club — tried them to see how a jogging parent would fare with each.

Overall, the mothers said they'd be somewhat unlikely to buy one, as in general they found the strollers big, bulky and heavy; some of the child harnesses fitted poorly or weren't able to be suitably adjusted; and/or the storage capacity for shopping was too small. On the plus side, both they and Lance liked swivel wheels. Lance, unlike the mothers, was reasonably likely to buy one — see above for more of his comments.

PROFILES

Models are profiled in rank order from left to right; prices a

GRACO ESPRIT LEISURE AIR 3

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- Passed all safety and durability tests.
- Trialists rated it as 'good' to use.
- Easy to fold up, as the trigger mechanism's on the handle.
- Has linked rear brakes.
- Rain cover provided.
- Front bar includes a small tray for baby food or toys.

BAD POINTS

- Front wheel doesn't swivel.
- The viewing window in the canopy doesn't have a covering flap.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

One trialist commented that "even though not a swivel-wheeler it was good on corners"; another, "lighter and smaller, easier to fit in a sedan". One felt the shopping bag was "nice and deep, but the opening was a bit narrow" and another found the backrest adjustment "awkward — if the strings are uneven, the baby's uneven".

BABYLOVE RANGER BL08

Price: $239 BEST BUY

GOOD POINTS

- The cheapest on test, yet passed all safety and durability tests.
- Trialists rated it as 'OK' to use.
- Has linked rear brakes and a front brake.
- Shoulder straps are padded.
- Handle height's adjustable — good for tall or short child-carers.
- Front bar for child to hold.

BAD POINTS

- Front wheel doesn't swivel.
- No viewing window in the canopy.
- No wrist strap for joggers.

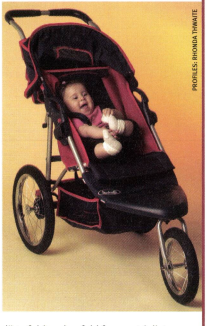
TRIALIST COMMENTS

"Narrow and not too long"; "liked the soft padding on shoulder straps", with "good systems for adjusting the backrest and folding and unfolding". Two commented, however, they found it "wobbly and rickety".

ommended retail, as supplied by manufacturers in May 2002.

STEELCRAFT SWIVEL JOGGER 36335

Price: $289 **BEST BUY**


PROFILES: RHONDA TINNATE

GOOD POINTS

- Passed all safety and durability tests.
- Trialists rated it as 'good' to use.
- Front wheel swivels and can also be locked in place.
- Has linked rear brakes.
- Leg cover provided.
- Front bar for child to hold.

BAD POINTS

- The bottom basket's base isn't rigid, so it could sag or drag along the ground when loaded.
- No wrist strap for joggers.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

One felt the "swivel wheel was very good, but the big back wheels made bumps very bumpy". Another liked the "nice-sized basket with a large opening". The stroller was "a bit awkward" to fold and unfold for one trialist, though, and the backrest "a bit fiddly" to operate for another.

MOUNTAIN BUGGY BREEZE SINGLE B1204-001

Price: $459

GOOD POINTS

- Passed all safety and durability tests.
- Trialists rated it as 'OK' to use.
- Compact and comparatively light.
- Has linked rear brakes.

BAD POINTS

- Relatively expensive.
- Front wheel doesn't swivel.
- Length of crotch strap isn't adjustable.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

"Compact, relatively lightweight, but no good for shopping — basket too small; no swivel wheel." Another commented on the "nice smooth action to raise or lower the backrest".

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

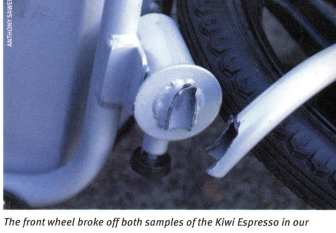
These strollers had at least one minor fault in terms of safety and/or durability.

- You need to reattach the straps securing the **BABY STAR GB-12DL**'s seat to the frame each time you unfold it; if you forget the seat comes away from the frame. Plus the crotch strap is too close to the front edge of the seat, so isn't very supportive, and our durability test found the locks for folding get hard to release over time.
- The **ROGER ARMSTRONG 5K KS100RA** has detachable parts — three retaining clips for the brake cable — that could be swallowed or inhaled, but they could be removed and replaced with, say, a piece of string.
- On the **SWALLOW City Slicker** and the **FITNESSWISE Sport Single** models, the back-up lock isn't strong enough to stop the stroller collapsing if the main lock isn't properly engaged.

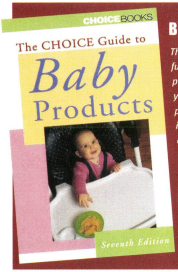
Not recommended

The following strollers are not recommended — we've serious concerns about their safety.

- The **KIWI Espresso**'s front wheel broke off at the welded joint only four hours into our durability test (see the photo, below). If this happened in use, the stroller could topple over and both the child and pusher be injured. We tested a second sample that hadn't been through our user trial first, and the same thing happened after 13 hours. Another problem is that the child may be able to reach and release the lock for the forward foldable section, collapsing the stroller.
- The seat of the **VALCO Marathon II N10758** is secured to the frame with Velcro straps that are released and reattached for folding and unfolding the stroller. As with the **BABY STAR**, if you forget to reattach them the seat comes away from the frame. Worse, though, this can also happen with the **VALCO** if you accidentally give the straps a strong tug when they're attached. So in effect your child isn't securely restrained in the stroller. It also has detachable parts (a zip tag on the front bar, and the foam filling inside the front bar) that a child under three could swallow or inhale.


ANTHONY SAWERS

The front wheel broke off both samples of the Kiwi Espresso in our tests — see 'Not recommended', above.



BABY BOOK

This buying guide is chock-full of baby stuff: tests of products for your baby so you can choose the best, plus other useful information, including a checklist of what you need before your baby arrives. Order it on page 36 or at www.choice.com.au/shop.

Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	1 Ease of use rating	Inflatable tyres	Rear brakes	Front brake	Swivelling front wheel
RECOMMENDED: Passed all our safety and durability assessments, and were easy to use					
GRACO Esprit Leisure Air 3 **(A)**	Good	✓	Linked		
STEELCRAFT Swivel Jogger 36335 **(B)**	Good	✓	Linked		✓ **(C)**
BABYLOVE Ranger BL08	OK	✓	Linked	✓	
MOUNTAIN BUGGY Breeze Single B1204-001	OK		Linked		
OK: We found at least one minor fault with regard to safety or durability or both (see What about the rest?, page 31					
BABY STAR GB-12DL	Good	✓	Linked		✓ **(C)**
ROGER ARMSTRONG SK KS100RA **(A)**	OK	✓	Left, right	✓	
SWALLOW City Slicker	OK	✓	Left, right	✓	
FITNESSWISE Sport Single	Borderline		Linked		✓ **(D)**
NOT RECOMMENDED: We found some serious faults with regard to safety or durability or both (see What about th					
KIWI Espresso	OK	✓	Left, right		✓ **(C)**
VALCO Marathon II N10758 **(A)**	Borderline	✓	Linked	✓	

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Measure your car boot space to make sure the stroller fits without needing the wheels removed (the **SWALLOW** and **ROGER ARMSTRONG** models didn't fit in the boot of a Mitsubishi Magna — a medium-sized sedan). Try folding it in the shop and see if you can carry it comfortably.

Get an idea of how well the brake locks work by applying the brakes while you try to push the handle. Give all the straps a tug to check they're secure and the seat doesn't come away from the frame. And give the wheels a tug, to see they don't come off.

Plus, consider:

- Are there protruding parts or ones that could pose a choking risk? Are there gaps that could trap your or your child's fingers? Are there sharp edges or points? Is there a child-resistant mechanism for locks? And is the stroller stable enough not to tip easily?

Look for the following features (see the table for which models have them when not stated here):

- **Wheels**: Large ones tend to be better on kerbs and stairs; pneumatic (inflatable) ones can puncture but generally give a comfier ride. If the front wheel swivels, it can make manoeuvring easier. Some models have swivel front wheels that can be locked in the forward direction, which is useful over rough terrain.
- **Harness**: All the tested models have a five-point harness with two shoulder straps (attached to the backrest at shoulder level; padded ones are softer), a waist strap and a crotch strap, with adjustable length for growth (the crotch straps of the **MOUNTAIN BUGGY** and **ROGER ARMSTRONG** aren't adjustable). The straps should be easy to adjust and the buckles easy to use (for you, but not your child).
- **Brakes**: All the tested strollers have rear brakes; it's handy if they're linked, so the left and right brakes can be locked with a single action rather than applied individually. Some also have a front brake — a lever on the handle that lets you stop the stroller quickly. Rear locks you can activate and release with your feet (as on tested models) prevent you bending, but make sure your feet fit under them easily.
- **Adjustable backrest**: Tested models have an upright backrest that can also move to at least one semi-reclined position; some can be fully reclined (best for sleeping). They have zips, backpack-style clips or a lever on the seat back to adjust the seat height. Trialists liked the levers best as zips can be hard to do up (even without a baby in the stroller), whereas levers are easy to use.
- **Footrest**: Reduces the likelihood of injury by the child's feet touching the ground or getting caught in the front wheel — all the tested models have one.
- **Front bar**: A detachable bar that the child can hold onto, but as it's not usually secure it shouldn't be used to lift the stroller.
- **Storage**: All models have a basket under the stroller, except the **FITNESSWISE** (but you can buy one for it as an extra), **ROGER ARMSTRONG** and **SWALLOW**. It can be useful for carrying things like nappies, baby food, clothes and your handbag. A pocket or pouch is good for lightweight items, and all but the **FITNESSWISE, KIWI** and **MOUNTAIN BUGGY** have one or both.
- **Canopy**: All tested models have one that you can extend for shade or shelter. With the exception of the **BABYLOVE** and **KIWI**, they have a **viewing window,** so when it's extended you can still see your child.
- **Leg cover**: The **STEELCRAFT** has a bag-like attachment you can pull over the child's legs for protection against the weather. For other models it's often available as an extra, so check the instructions or ask your retailer.
- **Rain cover**: The **GRACO** and **VALCO** come with a clear plastic cover you can drape over the stroller in wet weather. Again, check the

Has bottom basket (recommended capacity, kg)	Backrest positions*	Viewing window in canopy	Front bar	Leg cover / rain cover provided**	Recommended max child weight (kg)***	Weight (kg, with accessories)	Maximum length (cm)†	Maximum width (cm)†	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)‡
✓ / 4.5	Variable **(F)**	✓	✓ **(G)**	Rain cover	18	10.9	129	63	1	China	Bambino Graco	399
✓ / 4	Variable	✓	✓	Leg cover	17	11.9	132	60	1 **(H)**	China	Britax	289
✓ / 5	5		✓		20	11.3	114	61	1	China	BabyLove	239
✓ / 5	Variable	✓			30	7.0	92	57	1	NZ	Mountain Buggy	459
✓ / 4.5	3	✓			25	9.9	130	71	1	Taiwan	G & B Hammoud	365
Pouch only / 1	Variable	✓			23	10.8	134	63	1	China	Roger Armstrong	299
Pouch only / 1	Variable	✓			22	7.8	135	62	1	Taiwan	Babyco	300
(E) / 5	2	✓			45	11.9	131	69	1	NZ	Fitnesswise	399
st?)												
✓ / 3	3				23	9.3	123	66	1	NZ	Phil & Ted's	499
✓ / 8	3	✓	✓	Rain cover	22	12.1	116	70	1	China	Valiant	385

instructions or with your retailer whether it's available as an optional extra for other models.

- **Wrist strap:** All models except the **BABYLOVE** and **STEELCRAFT** have a leash on the handlebar you can loop around your wrist in case you lose your grip while jogging.
- **Tyre pump:** A hand-operated pump for inflating pneumatic tyres; some strollers have a clamp or holder for one. All the models with inflatable tyres except the **BABY STAR** and **KIWI** come with a pump, and the **GRACO**, **ROGER ARMSTRONG**, **STEELCRAFT** and **VALCO** also have a holder for it.

Thank you to all the trialists who road-tested the strollers for us.

ROSHAN THWAITE

* *Those that are labelled 'variable' can be set to any position within a certain range.*

** *For models where they're not provided, they may be available as optional extras. Check the instructions, or ask the retailer.*

*** *As recommended by the manufacturer.*

† *Dimensions exclude non-rigid projecting parts (such as fabric).*

‡ *Prices are recommended retail, as supplied by manufacturers in May 2002.*

(A) *Discontinued, but you may still find it in shops.*

(B) *'Swivel Jogger' may not appear on the stroller.*

(C) *Can be locked in forward direction.*

(D) *Lockable as an optional extra.*

(E) *Optional extra.*

(F) *Can be fully reclined.*

(G) *Serves as a small tray.*

(H) *Three months replacement.*

1 Ease of use

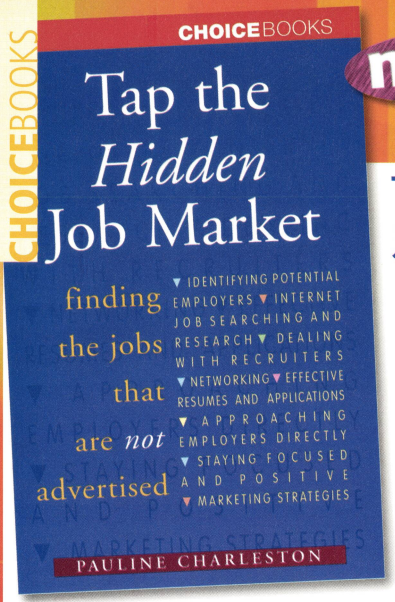
Trialists pushed each stroller over a set course and then rated them for manoeuvrability on concrete, grass, dirt and bark shavings. They also rated each for going through doors; up and down hills; stairs and kerbs; how easy it was to lift and carry and pack away in a car boot; plus ease of placing a child in the stroller and securing the harness. We averaged the scores to give each stroller an overall rating.

Tyres

If your stroller has air-filled wheels you need to examine them regularly for punctures and check their pressure. Manufacturer recommendations for tyre pressure ranged from 20–40 pounds per square inch (psi); we think 40's too high, so we inflated the tyres to a maximum of 25. Overinflating can burst tyres, and although underinflating makes a stroller trickier to steer it gives a comfier ride.

The tyre pumps that came with some models don't indicate the pressure you're filling the tyre to — it's probably better to pump the tyres up at a garage.

As tyre pumps have small parts that can be swallowed or inhaled, if you use one keep it away from your child.


CHOICEBOOKS
Tap the Hidden Job Market
finding the jobs that are not advertised
▼ IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL EMPLOYERS ▼ INTERNET JOB SEARCHING AND RESEARCH ▼ DEALING WITH RECRUITERS ▼ NETWORKING ▼ EFFECTIVE RESUMES AND APPLICATIONS ▼ APPROACHING EMPLOYERS DIRECTLY ▼ STAYING FOCUSED AND POSITIVE ▼ MARKETING STRATEGIES
PAULINE CHARLESTON

new

TAP THE *HIDDEN* JOB MARKET

Finding the jobs that are *not* advertised

Pauline Charleston

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You'll see, it'll be the beginning of a whole new career."

This was just one of many clichés recited by well-meaning advisers in the early 1990s when Pauline Charleston, along with 60% of her co-workers, was retrenched. The problem was that she had no desire to start a new career — her only consolation from the bleak situation was the thought that she could sleep in! So, how did she redefine her career, leading her to create an extremely successful consulting and training business? What experiences did she gain that will assist all job seekers and career changers — first-time or mature-age, professional or non-skilled?

She first noticed the severe lack of suitable job search advice. Very often it was patronising, uninformed and unrealistic; it assumed that job searching follows set formulae based on traditional search methods and blind persistence. And yet the best jobs are very often the ones that are never advertised; the hidden market of unadvertised jobs in Australia, the USA and the UK represents 65% to 90% of all appointments. The Australian Bureau of Statistics revealed in June 2001 that only 17.2% of jobs are found through newspapers and internet sites.

In *Tap the Hidden Job Market* Pauline Charleston reveals how to network, market yourself, research and then approach (by phone, letter or in person) prospective employers, use interim work options as a stepping stone to a new career and engage recruitment consultants productively. Written for an Australia-wide audience it demystifies the job market, provides up-to-date, all-round information, and also includes advice on recovering from job loss and staying focused and positive.

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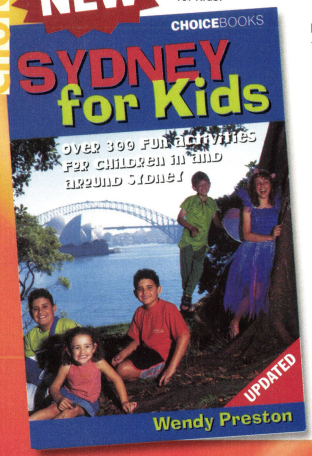
Meet ... Wendy Preston

AUTHOR OF *SYDNEY FOR KIDS*

NEW



This month we'd like to introduce Wendy Preston. We're releasing a new edition of her very successful book **Sydney for Kids.**

Hi! I'm Wendy Preston and I'd like to tell you how I came to write a book about all the great places in Sydney for families to visit.

I've been living in Sydney for nine years, having moved here for my husband's work when I was six months pregnant with our first child. Before this I was a high-school physical education and outdoor education teacher, so I've always been adventurous and one to get out and about. It wasn't long before I was exploring Sydney with my baby daughter. A couple of years later, along came our son. Soon after he turned two, it struck me that I'd never seen a guide to Sydney written especially for families. And so I started exploring all that Sydney has to offer families, mostly with my two 'guinea pigs' to help me test the venues. It took eighteen fun-filled months to research and write the first edition of *Sydney for Kids*. Since then, we've continued seeking out new places, finding 100 of them, and have revisited the others, so that the new edition has 300 exciting venues and activities in Sydney for kids up to 12 years old.

I hope the book can help make your family life as much fun as ours and also, along the way, that you learn much together.

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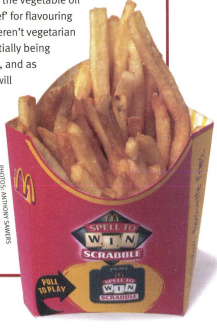
McDONALD'S IN HOT OIL

McDonald's in the US has found itself in a spot of bother over the vegetable oil used to cook its french fries and hash browns. For the past 10 years these have been advertised as vegetarian, as US stores started cooking them in vegetable oil instead of beef tallow — a highly saturated (and so unhealthy) fat.

Unfortunately, though, the vegetable oil contained 'essence of beef' for flavouring purposes, so the foods weren't vegetarian at all. McDonald's was initially being sued by three vegetarians, and as part of a settlement deal will donate $US10 million to Hindu, vegetarian and other groups.

Australian McDonald's outlets continue to use beef tallow, and the french fries have never been promoted as vegetarian. They're just much tougher on your arteries.

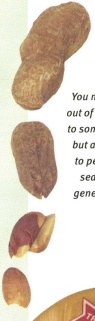


PHOTOS: ANTHONY SAWERS

FOOD ALLERGY VS INTOLERANCE

What's the difference? You have a food allergy when your immune system reacts to certain food. The reaction usually occurs in minutes, and generally what happens is that your body creates antibodies to the food. When these antibodies react with the food, histamine and other chemicals cause hives, asthma, or other symptoms of an allergic reaction.

Food intolerance or sensitivity is an adverse reaction to a food that doesn't involve the immune system. It may cause discomfort and pain, such as the bloating and stomach pain associated with lactose intolerance, but it's not potentially life-threatening in the same way as many food allergies.



You may grow out of allergies to some foods, but an allergy to peanuts or seafood will generally last for life.

E-LOLLIES?

You've probably seen ads for **TREBOR 24-7** lollies if your kids haven't already brought them home. Their packaging looks like a pill box, out of which you pop them just like pills, and if that's not enough for some people, the lollies also bear an uncanny resemblance to ecstasy tablets (so we're told).

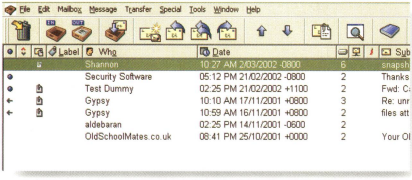
Perhaps of more concern is that the lemon-flavoured variety contains guarana, which itself contains caffeine. While the lollies are described in a trade magazine as being "targeted to young adults, 18-24; socially conscious, cash-rich, time-poor", when we were buying them at the supermarket we came across a woman buying them for her six-year-old daughter, as they were "the latest thing at school".

While the amount of caffeine in the lollies is relatively low, they're still called 'Lemon Lift with guarana vitality', so they're obviously expected to have some effect. It's certainly worth checking the contents of the ones your kids are buying before they start popping them for all they're worth.

Concern about these lollies and the tactics used to market them even reached a recent meeting of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards ministers. They've asked Food Standards Australia New Zealand and the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing to provide advice at their next meeting on measures to address this style of marketing.

Avoiding viruses

Computer viruses are getting sneakier, so make sure your defences are up to scratch.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IN A NUTSHELL

- **If you use the internet,** *you may need to update your antivirus software as often as twice a week to be safe.*
- **How do you find** *what you need? See* Where to find the info, *below left.*

New computer viruses take advantage of human nature to spread themselves. If your computer was infected with BadTrans-B, circulating late last year, all your unread emails were replied to by the virus. It sent copies of itself to everyone who was expecting a reply from you — a sure way to get the email opened, allowing BadTrans-B to infect a new round of computers. Its clever tactics caught thousands of people by surprise and many received hundreds of infected emails within hours.

It's more important than ever now to have antivirus software as a first line of defence against viruses, worms and other malicious software.

THE DANGERS

A virus is simply a computer file that can copy itself, spreading without permission between files, computers, and across the internet. Viruses and other malicious software are deliberately written to be disruptive, destructive or to gather information.

Your computer might get a virus via an infected floppy disk or CD-ROM, from an infected document or email attachment, or via infected websites or downloaded files. Worms, on the other hand, move exclusively through networks like the internet.

The simplest way to avoid viruses and worms is to have antivirus software with the ability to check every file entering and leaving your computer. Even so, most antivirus software needs regular updates, and new viruses come out rapidly. If you're on the internet, you face a higher risk, and you may need to update your software two or more times a week to keep on top of new virus threats.

IF YOU HAVE A MAC ...

... far fewer viruses can infect your computer, and you're mostly at risk from infected word processor and spreadsheet documents.

You can follow a few steps to help reduce your chances of getting caught by the next Melissa or IloveYou.

STOP RIGHT THERE

- Use antivirus software to check all files and documents on your computer. For more information and recommendations, *Computer* CHOICE tested antivirus software recently, and the results are online (see *Where to find the info*, below).
- Don't open email with an attachment (like those shown above) unless you're expecting it, even if it's from someone you know.
- Plug your software's security holes (see *Security focus* on www.choice.com.au for how to do this).
- If you don't know something's virus-free, assume it isn't.
- Back up important data regularly.
- Don't send virus warnings by email — it encourages the kind of behaviour that viruses use to spread.

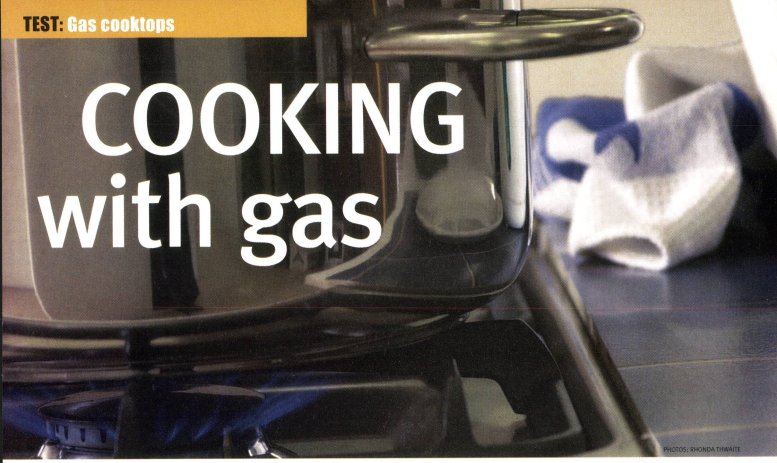
WHAT TO DO

If you think you may have a virus and aren't sure if your antivirus software is up-to-date, don't panic. You can use a free online scanner, such as http://housecall.antivirus.com, to check your files, or download a free trial version of almost any of the major antivirus software products, to check whether your computer is infected. The software (and the manufacturer's website) should provide the information you need to remove the virus and restore your computer to full working order.

WHERE TO FIND THE INFO

- Antivirus software manufacturers include Symantec (www.symantec.com), Trend Micro (www.pccillin.com) and Grisoft (www.grisoft.com). Grisoft's AVG software is free for personal use.
- There's information about virus hoaxes at www.vmyths.com.
- www.choice.com.au has more information about viruses, including our latest antivirus software test. To find it, type 'virus' into the search box on the home page. To subscribe to *Computer* CHOICE, see page 49. ■

COOKING with gas



PHOTOS: RHONDA TIPWHITE

Two Australian-made models are best at cooking.

Whether it's cars or cooktops, if it's from overseas — and/or costs a lot — it must be better, right? Not in this case.

It might be tempting to go for a 'Mercedes Benz' kitchen as well as in the garage, but these cooktops show you don't always get a better product if you buy an expensive European cooking appliance. The top two models are made in Australia, and one of them's a good deal cheaper than most of the comparable European-made cooktops tested.

While choosing a cooktop might depend on how it looks in your kitchen as well as how it works, if you're happy with the look of the **SIMPSON**, it's quite a bargain at $661 — especially since its scores are almost as good as those of the **WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso**, which costs $982. Both are made by the same manufacturer — the major difference between the two models is the trivet type and how that affects cooking performance and stability, plus slightly different wok burners, controls and labelling.

HOW WELL DO THEY COOK?

All the models have a good range of temperatures (both low and high), which allows you to cook different types of food successfully. We found they cooked rice nicely with only a little sticking in some cases (which means they can quickly turn down to an appropriately low temperature); most maintained low temperatures well without browning or sticking in our white sauce test (most gave a good, pale sauce without a raw taste); and most can provide continuous high heat necessary for cooking things like stir-fries, giving browned, tender meat and crisp veges.

You'd expect gas output (effectively, how much heat each burner produces) to equate to cooking performance and give you some indication of how a model will cope with a particular kind of cooking, but our tests found this is far from foolproof. For example, the **SMEG** wok burner has one of the highest rated outputs and cooked the best stir-fry, browning meat well and maintaining continuous high heat; the **FISHER AND PAYKEL** wok burner, however, has the same high rating but wasn't quite as good.

The **MIELE** doesn't have a wok burner — we used the large burner instead. Although its gas output is

WHAT TO BUY

WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso GHVJ765SNG	$982
SIMPSON 72C315SNG BEST BUY	$661

These models were slightly better than the others in our cooking tests, and are very easy to use — plus they have a flame-failure protection feature. The **SIMPSON**'s particularly good value, being one of the cheapest models in the test.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: 10 four-burner** *stainless steel gas cooktops. All cooked pretty well at both low and high temperatures (see* How well do they cook?, *left, for more).*
- **A flame-failure protection** *feature is important for safety (see* Safety concerns, *page 40); the profiled models all have it.*
- **The cooktops came with** *either enamel or cast iron trivets. On models with both available, cast iron generally gave better cooking results and were more stable (see* Right in a trivet?, *page 40). You can sometimes buy them as an optional extra.*

Cast iron trivets generally gave slightly better cooking results, and tend to be heavier, sturdier and more stable.

OTHER FUELS

We bought gas cookers fitted for connection to natural gas. All tested models are also available for LPG, but you need to buy some already fitted for it, whereas others can be converted after purchase. So if there's a chance you might want to change fuels, check with your retailer whether the model you're interested in can be converted later. A licensed gasfitter must perform any fuel conversion.

rated lower than all the wok burners, it managed stir-fries better than the **KLEENMAID** and **ARISTON**.

Unlike older gas models, the tested models all turn immediately from off to high heat, and then you adjust them to a lower setting. This makes the lowest setting easy to distinguish without putting the flame out — you just turn the knob all the way down.

RIGHT IN A TRIVET?

We tested the cooking performance of two of the models available with enamel or cast iron trivets with both, and found that generally they cooked a bit better with the cast iron ones. For example, the **SMEG** scored 85% for cooking using cast iron trivets and 79% with enamel. The **DELONGHI**, while good with both kinds, scored a bit better for white sauce and rice with cast iron trivets.

Safety concerns

Models with a flame-failure protection feature take longer to ignite — you need to hold the control down for a few seconds for the flame to stay on. Although this could be a bit annoying, having the feature means that if the flame goes out the gas supply to the burners automatically shuts off, which is an important safety feature for gas appliances. To check if a cooktop has flame-failure protection, look for two small rods sticking up next to the burner — one for the ignition system (the white insulated one) and one to detect the flame. They can be on opposite sides of the burner or hidden by the cap, so you need to look closely.

If you want to use gas appliances such as a cooktop in a high-rise building of 25 m or taller, you may need to get a model with flame-failure protection. Check with your local council.

PROFILES

The models profiled (in rank order from le

WESTINGHOUSE VIRTUOSO GHVJ765SNG

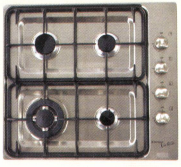
Price: $982

GOOD POINTS

- Best for cooking, operating well at both high and low temperatures.
- The easiest to use, with clearly labelled controls that don't require much force to operate.
- The cast iron trivets are solid, stable and have rubber feet.

BAD POINTS

- The burners have an aluminium surround that sticks out from the base and can be tricky to clean (but the manufacturer told us this will be changed in November).
- The controls are a bit awkward to grip.
- Expensive.



KLEENMAID SECURIS CH600FFX1

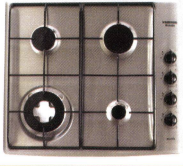
Price: $979

GOOD POINTS

- Good at cooking, operating well at both high and low temperatures.
- Easy to use — controls are comfortable to grip and easy to operate.
- The comprehensive instructions include a cooking guide.
- The burner caps overlap the burner surround, preventing splatters on the frill and making cleaning easier.

BAD POINTS

- The trivets don't have rubber feet and move easily.
- A small pan could easily unbalance on the largest burner if it's not centred. (Kleenmaid told us it provides a small plate to prevent this, but it wasn't with the cooktop we bought.)
- Symbols to indicate burner types aren't very clear.
- Expensive.



nt) all have flame-failure protection, cook well and are easy to use. Prices are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in May 2002.

SIMPSON 72C315SNG

BEST BUY

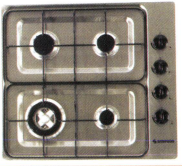
Price: $661

GOOD POINTS

- Very good at cooking, operating well at both high and low temperatures.
- Easy to use, with clearly marked, easy-to-operate controls.

BAD POINTS

- The trivets aren't very stable and don't have rubber feet, plus the one for the wok burner is higher and could get in the way when you're moving heavy pans.
- The burners have an aluminium surround that sticks out from the base and can be tricky to clean (but the manufacturer told us this will be changed in November).



MIELE KM 310 G

Price: $899

GOOD POINTS

- Very good at cooking, operating well at both high and low temperatures.
- The cast iron trivets have rubber feet and are fairly stable.
- The burner caps overlap the surround, making cleaning easier.

BAD POINTS

- No wok burner (models in this price range from other brands often have one), but the manufacturer says gas cooktops with a wok burner will be available later this year.
- No automatic ignition — you need to hold down the ignition button and the control.
- The controls are at the front and so accessible to children, although they'd need to hold down both buttons to get a flame.
- Labelling is faint.
- Expensive.

FISHER & PAYKEL GC600WF

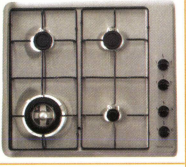
Price: $622

GOOD POINTS

- Good at cooking, operating well at both high and low temperatures.
- The trivets are fairly stable, with rubber feet.
- Easy to use — controls are comfortable to grip, clearly labelled and easy to operate.

BAD POINTS

- The burners have an aluminium surround that sticks out from the base and can be tricky to clean.



CHEF GHCF610SNG*10

Price: $774

GOOD POINTS

- Good at cooking, operating well at both high and low temperatures, although comparatively it had the equal-lowest cooking score in the test.
- The controls are large and easy to grip, with clear markings in words.

BAD POINTS

- The wok burner trivet is higher than the others and could get in the way when you're moving heavy pans.
- The trivets don't have rubber feet and move easily.
- You can't remove the wok burner cap for cleaning, and this burner also has an enamel surround that sticks out from the base and can be tricky to clean.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The **WHIRLPOOL AKM 157/IX/2** doesn't have flame-failure protection and has one of the lowest scores for ease of use, although it cooked very well at low temperatures in particular.
- The **DELONGHI DGHSII** comes with cast iron trivets and cooked very well at low temperatures (but not quite as well at high ones). It has small symbols and the burner surrounds are tricky to clean.
- Although the **SMEG SAR134AXS** cooked a very good stir-fry — the best in our tests — overall it was equal worst for cooking, particularly for maintaining a very low temperature for a long time while cooking white sauce. It's also expensive, and costs $160 more if you want cast iron trivets (which gave better cooking results in all the tests).
- The **ARISTON PH 640MST (IX) NG** is relatively expensive, ranked as the equal worst for cooking and worst for ease of use. Some people may fancy its unusual diamond-shaped burner configuration, but with the simmer burner inconveniently located at the rear, you need to reach over the other burners to stir a sauce.

For people with a disability

- The best models for a wheelchair user are the MIELE, WHIRLPOOL, DELONGHI and ARISTON, as their controls are at the front.
- None is ideal for people with upper limb dysfunction, but the SIMPSON has large, easy to use controls with crossbars.
- For visually impaired people the CHEF is best — it's clearly labelled in words.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Cooking score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)	4 FEATURES Flame-failure protection	Auto ignition	Wok burner	SPECIFICATIONS Trivets	Control position	Claimed burner ratings (MJ/h)
WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso GHVJ765SNG	86	90	81	✓	✓	✓	Cast iron	Right-hand side	14.0, 10.8, 7.0, 4.6
SIMPSON 72C315SNG	82	87	75	✓	✓	✓	Enamel	Right-hand side	14.0, 10.8, 7.0, 4.6
FISHER & PAYKEL GC600WF	79	82	74	✓	✓	✓	Enamel	Right-hand side	15.0, 2 x 6.1, 3.7
KLEENMAID Securis CH600FFX1	79	80	77	✓	✓	✓	Enamel	Right-hand side	12.0, 8.0, 5.4, 3.4
MIELE KM 310 G	78	83	71	✓	**(A)**		Cast iron	Front	10.6, 2 x 7.2, 3.1
CHEF GHCF610SNG*10	77	79	74	✓	✓	✓	Enamel	Right-hand side	17.0, 11.1, 6.5, 5.5
WHIRLPOOL AKM 157/IX/2	77	84	66		✓	✓	Enamel	Front	13.5, 2 x 7.1, 3.8
DELONGHI DGHSII	76	80	71	✓	✓	✓	Cast iron **(B)**	Front	11.9, 2 x 6.3, 3.6
SMEG SAR134AXS	76	79	72	✓	✓	✓	Enamel **(C)**	Right-hand side	15.0, 2 x 5.9, 4.8
ARISTON PH 640MST (IX) NG	70	79	57	✓	✓	✓	Enamel	Front	13.0, 8.3, 6.0, 3.3

* *Recommended retail price, as provided by the manufacturer/distributor in May 2002.*

(A) *No — separate button.*
(B) *Optional enamel trivets available.*
(C) *Optional cast iron trivets available.*

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

*Three of the cooktops arrived with a problem — the **SMEG** lacked a regulator (which the manufacturer says the retailer should supply); the **WESTINGHOUSE** was missing two burner caps; and the **WHIRLPOOL**'s electronic ignition didn't work.*

If this is a reflection of the general condition on delivery, it could be frustrating — while your installer would pick up the problem, they may not be able to fix it on the spot. You might need to wait for parts before you could use your new cooktop.

What to look for

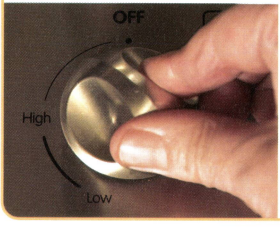
Before you buy a gas cooktop, consider:

Size and shape: Cooktops come in a variety of sizes, shapes and layouts, and most have four burners. Larger cooktops can also include a fish burner, designed for large rectangular pans, a deep-fat fryer or grill. You can also find cooktops with a mixture of gas and electric burners.

Wok burners should be at the front, as on the tested models, for accessible continuous stirring of food. The same goes for the simmer burner (at the front on all tested except the **ARISTON**), so you don't have to lean over other burners to stir a sauce, say.

Burners: Single-piece burners, as on the **MIELE**, are easier to clean and maintain.

Gas burners are rated in megajoules per hour (MJ/h) — the amount of energy they use on maximum heat. Four-burner cooktops should have a good range of heat ratings, from slow (low heat: around 3.5 to 5 MJ/h) to fast (high heat: up to 10 or 11 MJ/h), with wok burners around 12 to 15 MJ/h.



Control knobs all turn anticlockwise and the heat settings go from high to low, which is the opposite of many older cooktops and ranges and could take a bit of getting used to.

Controls: Look for good-sized knobs that click into place, with a crossbar that's easy to grip and a clear pointer. Check they're easy to reach, with symbols and markings that are easy to read and understand.

Ignition: Cooktops with automatic electronic ignition have to be connected to a mains power supply, but if there's a power cut they can be lit with matches.

A variation you can find on some of the *Similar models* (see right) is piezo ignition, which generates its own spark mechanically.

Trivets or pan supports should be flat and stable on the hob. Those with **rubber feet** are less likely to move about than those without, and don't scratch the hob surface. When you're in the shop, see how much movement — up and down and side to side — you get. Trivets without large gaps allow you to slide pans around the cooktop without lifting them.

See *Right in a trivet?*, page 40, for differences between cast iron and enamel trivets.

Cleaning: Look for rounded depressions around burners, sunken hobs and/or partitioning ridges that minimise the spread of any spillage. Surfaces should be easy to wipe clean, without dirt traps such as joins and gaps. Pan supports and trivets should be easy to remove and wash in the sink.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Ease of use score (%)	3 Heat retention score (%)	3 Temperature loss (°C)	4 FEATURES Pushbutton stopper	Shoulder strap	SPECIFICATIONS Measured volume (L)	Diameter of opening/s (mm)	Weight wh empty (g)*
ALADDIN Magnum Steel MB7100	80	73	83	13.4			1	42	881
THERMOS NCA-10P **(A)**	79	71	82	14.0		✓	1	43	748
THERMOS Add a Cup 2580	78	65	83	13.5			1	43	783
TARGET	77	69	81	14.7	✓	✓	1	44	810
THE PRICE BRAND 36-969-784	77	72	79	15.5	✓		1	51	581
THERMOS Nissan NCD-10	77	69	80	14.9		✓	1	43	759
JACKEROO 14765056	76	71	79	15.6			0.9 **(C)**	59	673
AVANTI 15667	74	60	80	14.8		✓	1	48	689
GET SET HOMEWARES	74	60	79	15.3		✓	1	48	682
ALADDIN Discovery+ APH1000D	72	74	71	19.3	✓		1	51	792
ALADDIN Stanley Series II B944	71	69	72	19.2	**(B)**		1	46	1036
PRONTO! HOS-10 **(A)**	70	72	69	20.7	✓		0.9 **(C)**	51	636
ARCOSTEEL KVF 12	66	60	68	20.8		✓	1.2	76 / 42 **(D)**	908
HART & HOLM COLLECTION SKU# 176774	63	63	63	23.4			1	42	691
AVANTI 15668	62	60	63	23.7	✓	✓	1.2	77 / 34 **(D)**	954
EXPLORER CZK-9100	59	67	55	27.4		✓	1	51	769

Profiles

The models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order. Prices are what we paid in February 2002. It's worth shopping around, because we bought m

ALADDIN MB7100 MAGNUM STEEL

Price: $55

The stopper is very easy to remove and replace. However, it's one of the bulkier, heavier models.

THERMOS NCA-10P

Price: $43

The screw-type pouring mechanism pours well, although the stopper can be hard to grip because it's not as chunky as others. The cup may be too hot to hold when filled with very hot liquids.

THERMOS ADD A CUP 2580

Price: $50

This model has two cups that can also be screwed one inside the other and used as one cup. When used separately, they may be too hot to hold when filled with very hot liquids. Check the cups for well-fitting threads before you buy: on the one we bought, the thread of the outer cup slipped when tightened. It's also one of the bulkier models on test.

TARGET

Price: $30

Has a pushbutton stopper that pours well. The cup may be too hot to hold when filled with very hot liquids, and it's one of the heavier models.

PHOTOS: RUSSELL RIGHETTI

What to look for

- Most models have a handle, which can help with pouring but can also add to the space the flask takes up. If space is at a premium, a model without a handle or thick base and surrounding plastic sections may be preferable.
- A lighter flask is easier to carry on long walks.
- Outer reinforcing sections may provide added protection to the body if it's going to get rough treatment. But small dents in the outer surface of the flask shouldn't greatly affect performance.
- A shoulder strap may be useful if you're travelling light.
- Pushbutton stoppers are easier to operate than screw-type ones, but are more fiddly to clean (you have to take them apart) and may not last as long. See *How to avoid problems*, right, for more. It might be a good idea to get a spare one from the manufacturer when you first buy the flask, in case they're no longer available when you need a replacement.
- Models with a larger opening don't maintain temperature as well as those with a smaller one, but you may prefer them if you're going to be using the flask for chunky soups or casseroles.
- Some models have two cups, or a cup and a bowl-like container for soups, which might suit your needs better than a single cup.

The type of pouring mechanism didn't make a difference to maintaining temperature. And we experienced problems with both types of stopper, although this may be avoidable — see *How to avoid problems*, right, for more.

WHAT TO BUY

ALADDIN Magnum Steel MB7100	$55
THERMOS NCA-10P	$43
THERMOS Add a Cup 2580	$50
TARGET	$30
THE PRICE BRAND 36-969-784* TEST BUY	$18
THERMOS Nissan NCD-10	$69
JACKEROO 14765056	$40

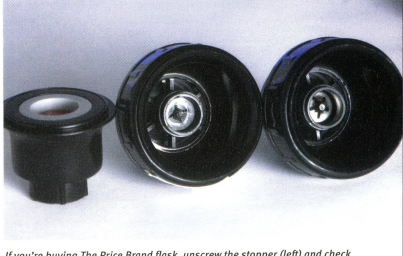
* *But see* How to avoid problems, *right.*

HOW TO AVOID PROBLEMS

- We had to buy another **THE PRICE BRAND** flask during testing because the pushbutton stopper on the first one fell apart after being used only a few times. A spring-loaded plastic clip (which acts as a retainer for the button release mechanism in the stopper) came off, allowing components to separate and the stopper seal to open. This could cover you with hot liquid at the time and makes the flask unusable.

  The second one had a metal retaining washer rather than a plastic one, and we had no problems with it.

  If you fancy this model — it's a good flask at a nice price — you can see for yourself in the shop whether you're getting the plastic or metal washer. Take the lid off the flask and unscrew the top section of the stopper (the bit with the pushbutton) and look down into the remaining part of the stopper. The washer with a star-shaped hole sits over a plastic spike, and will be either silver metal or whitish plastic (see the photo, below).
- We also had some problems with the stoppers of the **EXPLORER** and **GET SET HOMEWARES** flasks: the stoppers kept turning when we tightened them, rather than stopping at their tightest, because the threads were slipping. The same thing happened with the **THERMOS Add a Cup**'s outer cup. To be on the safe side, check any flask you're buying to see that all threads are relatively deep and have a good fit.
- Finally, the inner part of the **PRONTO**!'s pushbutton stopper sometimes came apart if overtightened or if pressure was applied from the side. The distributor says this model has been replaced and the new model doesn't have this problem.



If you're buying The Price Brand flask, unscrew the stopper (left) and check inside for a metal (right) rather than a plastic washer (also see above).

VACUUM FLASKS

If you're out in the cold, wearing chunky gloves, you'll appreciate a flask that keeps stuff nice and hot and requires as little fiddling about as possible.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test are 16** *stainless steel vacuum flasks ranging in price from $17 to around $70 — and our* What to buy *list covers the whole price range.*
- **Some models** *retain heat better than others, and there are marked differences in how well they pour.*
- **The main problem** *we discovered was with the stoppers — see* How to avoid problems, *far right, for more.*

Many of us will remember Thermoses of old, with their distinctive tartan casing and the mirrored glass inside … and that sinking feeling after dropping your schoolbag and hearing the tinkle of glass breaking. These days many vacuum flasks are durable stainless steel — a relief for the more active (and careless) among us.

At room temperature (about 22°C), the flasks on test kept water hot enough for a cuppa even after eight hours. Temperatures weren't quite so high after that time when we 'used' half the water after a few hours, and in colder temperatures outdoors more heat will be lost. Comparatively speaking, though, the models in our *What to buy* list are among the best at maintaining the contents' heat.

Another important aspect of a flask is how easy it is to pour stuff out. Most models have a mechanism that allows you to pour without removing the stopper completely, which makes it a lot less fiddly. There are a two basic types:

- The pushbutton type. This is easy to operate and usually gives a smooth flow of liquid, although it's a bit more fiddly to clean afterwards.
- The screw-type allows you to partially unscrew the stopper and pour through a channel in the screw thread. Some of these gave a smooth flow, but others allowed only a small trickle or a splashy, splayed flow. In such cases it can be easier to simply take the stopper right out — which might not be convenient in some situations.

Only one model, the **ALADDIN Stanley Series II B944**, didn't have either of these pouring mechanisms, so you have to take the stopper out completely to pour (which you also need to do with the others if you're pouring chunky soup).

Dimensions (W x D, cm)	Origin	Warranty (years)	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
60 x 54	Australia	1	Electrolux	982
60 x 54	Australia	1	Electrolux	661
58 x 51	NZ	2	Fisher & Paykel	622
60 x 53	France	5	Kleenmaid / St George	979
59 x 53	Germany	2	Miele	899
66 x 52	Australia	1	Electrolux	774
59 x 50	Italy	2	Whirlpool	549
58 x 50	Italy	2	Parex Industries	699
59 x 50	Italy	2	Omega Appliances	945
59 x 51	Italy	5	Arisit	849

1 Overall score
We assessed cooking performance and ease of use, weighting them as follows:
Cooking performance: 60%
Ease of use: 40%

2 Cooking score
See *How well do they cook?*, page 39, for details of the cooking tests. Each test was performed twice and the scores averaged.

3 Ease of use score
This was made up of the following scores:
Ease of using cooktop (including cleaning): 50%
Ease of using controls: 40%
Instructions: 10%

4 Features
For an explanation of flame-failure protection see *Safety concerns*, page 40. Other features, including some not listed in the table, are described in *What to look for*, left.

SIMILAR MODELS

The following models would score similarly for performance to the models we tested (in *italics*), though there might be small differences due to different trivet types. Ease of use may also differ a bit because of different controls or features. However, in some cases the only difference is the colour or finish.

- *WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso GHVJ765SNG*: **GHVJ765W** (white). The **GHH17S** (stainless steel), **GHH17W** (white) and **GHH17K** (black) have enamel trivets. The **GHH16S** (stainless steel), **GHH16W** (white) and **GHH16K** (black) don't have flame-failure protection and have enamel trivets.
- *SIMPSON 72C315SNG*: **72C315W** (white). The following models don't have flame-failure protection and have piezo ignition: **72C313S** (stainless steel), **72C313W** (white). The **92E375S** (stainless steel) and **92E375W** (white) don't have flame-failure protection.
- *FISHER & PAYKEL GC600WF*: **Quantum GC600QJET** and **GC600WFC** (cast iron trivets), **GC600W** (no flame-failure protection; available in white or stainless steel).
- *CHEF GHCF6210SNG*10*: **GHCF6210W** (white). The **GHC6210W** (white), **GHC6210K** (black) and **GHC6210S** (stainless steel) don't have flame-failure protection. The **GHS6210S** and **GHS6210W** also have brass burners and separate battery ignition.
- *MIELE KM 310 G*: **KM 300 G** has no flame-failure protection.
- *DELONGHI DGHSII*: **LGHSII** has enamel trivets and no flame-failure protection.
- *SMEG SAR134AXS*: **SAR134AWS** (white), **CIR34AX** (cast iron trivets), **SAR134AX** (no flame-failure protection), **SAR134W** (no flame-failure protection, white), **SAR134BK** (no flame-failure protection, black), **SA134X** (no flame-failure protection, no wok burner). Colonial-style **SAR804** models are available in anthracite/gold, white/gold and panna/gold.
- *ARISTON PH 640MST (IX) NG*: The **PH 640MT (IX)** and **PH 640MT (WH)** (white) don't have flame-failure protection.

KEEPING THE GLEAM

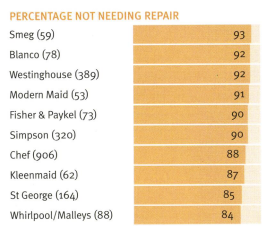
It's best not to use abrasive cleaners on these stainless steel cooktops as they can leave scratches on the surface. See your instructions for the manufacturer's cleaning recommendations.

HOW RELIABLE HAVE SUBSCRIBERS FOUND THEM?

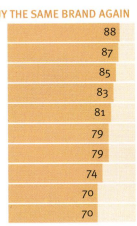
We asked subscribers whether their cooktop had needed repair in the previous 12 months and whether they'd buy the same brand again. Overall, 10% of gas cooktops had needed repair, with the range of reliability (the percentage that hadn't needed repair) 84%–93% across all brands reported on (gas, electric and combined).

The graphs show results for brands for which we received more than 50 replies (the numbers in brackets show how many people reported on each brand).

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR



PERCENTAGE WHO'D BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)**
5	China	Aladdin Industries	55
5 **(E)**	China	The Thermos Co	43
5 **(E)**	Malaysia	The Thermos Co	50
ns	China	Target	30
5	China	Kmart	18
5 **(E)**	Malaysia	The Thermos Co	69
5	China	Kmart	40
Lifetime' **(F)**	China	Avanti	40
ns	China	Get Set Homewares	17
5	China	Aladdin Industries	40
Lifetime' **(F)**	India	Aladdin Industries	63
5	China	Pronto!	18
0	China	Arcosteel	42
ns	China	BBC	19
Lifetime' **(F)**	China	Avanti	45
5	China	Big W	20

* *Includes accessories such as cups and shoulder straps.*

** *Prices are what we paid in February 2002.*

ns *Not stated.*

(A) *This model is now discontinued but may still be available in shops.*

(B) *Stopper has to be removed completely to pour. The other models without a pushbutton let you pour without having to completely remove the stopper.*

(C) *This is slightly lower than the claimed volume of 1 L.*

(D) *Has two stoppers: an inner one which fits into a larger one. Removing the inner one gives a narrow opening; removing both a wider opening — convenient for chunky soups, etc.*

(E) *One year on plastic cups and stoppers.*

(F) *A 'lifetime' warranty usually just means that the product is guaranteed to last as long as it lasts. This isn't as useful as a stated number of years and leaves a lot up to the retailer's or manufacturer's discretion.*

1 Overall score

The overall score is made up as follows:

- Heat retention score: 70%
- Ease of use score: 30%

2 Ease of use score

This is based on the stopper, pouring, ease of cleaning and the cup.

3 Heat retention score

Flasks were near-filled with water just off boiling point and tested for temperature loss after eight hours: the less loss, the higher the score.

4 Features

See *What to look for*, page 45, for more on these.

TESTER'S TIP

To get the hottest possible drink from your flask, preheat it with boiling water. You don't have to fill the flask to the brim — simply put enough water in to swirl around, so it can heat the air in the vacuum as well as the steel. Be careful when you open it, as the pressure will have built up: undo the stopper slowly and away from your face. Tip out the water and fill the flask with whatever you want to drink.

Use water and ice cubes to prepare it for cold drinks.

urs for less than the recommended retail price.

THE PRICE BRAND 36-969-784

Price: $18 BEST BUY

Has a tall, slimline design and takes up less space than other models. It's also one of the lighter models and has a pushbutton stopper that pours well (but see *How to avoid problems*, page 45, for more on its stopper). The cup may be too hot to hold when filled with very hot liquids.

THERMOS NISSAN NCD-10

Price: $69

The screw-type pouring mechanism pours well, although the stopper can be hard to grip because it's not as chunky as others. The cup may be too hot to hold when filled with very hot liquids.

JACKEROO 14765056

Price: $40

One of the lighter models, and also easy to clean. The cup may be too hot to hold when filled with very hot liquids.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The **AVANTI 15667** and **GET SET HOMEWARES** scored well for heat retention but didn't pour very well.
- The remaining models lost quite a lot of heat over time, and the **ARCOSTEEL, HART & HOLM COLLECTION** and **AVANTI 15668** were also let down by their ease of use.

recalls&bans

*Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Federal Treasury website: **www.recalls.gov.au**. If you don't have web access, call the **Safety Policy Unit** on (02) 6263 2747.*

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

THE PRODUCT: Blundstone has recalled the following styles of **Blundstone Safety Footwear** (sizes 10, 10.5, 11 and 12 only), with box dates from 22-APR-02 to 30-APR-02 (inclusive), sold from April 22 to May 5, 2002:

- Black elastic-sided boots, styles 330, 350.
- Brown elastic-sided boots, styles 331, 351.
- Fawn elastic-sided boots, style 356.
- Black lace-up boots, style 353.
- Black lace-up shoes, style 347.
- Suede high-leg lace boots, style 357.

The problem: Due to a manufacturing defect they may not comply with the Australian standard.

What to do: Note the number on the traceability tag sewn inside the right boot, then contact Blundstone Customer Service for advice on (03) 6272 3456, fax 1800 062 780 or email info@blundstone.com.au.

THE PRODUCT: Easybuy.com.au (trading as **Bikes Direct**) has recalled 61 bicycles sold over the internet.

The problem: They don't comply with the Australian standard.

What to do: To find out if your bike's affected and if so, what to do, contact Bikes Direct at Easybuy.com.au or on (02) 4272 2022.

THE PRODUCT: Andrew Australia has recalled **7 GHz ValuLine antennas with 6-foot ABS moulded plastic radomes** (covers over the front of the antenna) — models VHP6 and VHPX6, imported from April 1999 to January 2002.

The problem: The radomes may fail and possibly fall off, which could then cause the antenna to fall to the ground.

What to do: Contact Andrew Australia on 1800 803 219.

THE PRODUCT: NLZ has recalled **Provalue Tools elastic luggage straps** — 12 mm by 48 inch bungee cords, with barcode 9325184006275, or six-piece bungee cord packs with barcode 9325184006596, sold from Go-Lo stores in SA.

The problem: They don't have the required permanently attached yellow warning labels.

What to do: Return them to a Go-Lo store for a refund, or for more information phone NLZ on (03) 9583 9777 or Go-Lo on (02) 8796 6100.

THE PRODUCT: Austwide Wholesalers has recalled the following toys sold through discount and variety stores before May 16, 2002:

- **Anti-crime set:** handcuffs, toy watch, baton and 10 cm x 8 cm toy gun with two 7 cm plastic darts with orange tips (barcode 9316341102657).
- **Sharpshooter space gun:** a space gun and six round balls (barcode 9316341192018).
- **Dino shooting game:** 16 cm x 9 cm blue toy gun with six 5 cm orange soft plastic darts, and targets with dinosaur motifs (barcode 9316341188200).
- **Suction dart gun:** 20 cm x 13 cm grey toy gun with four 5 cm orange soft plastic darts (barcode 9316341188286).
- **EVA number/alpha puzzle:** foam puzzle depicting letters and numbers (barcode 9316341198323).
- **EVA number puzzle:** jigsaw-style foam puzzle depicting numbers (barcode 9316341156803).
- **EVA animal puzzle:** jigsaw-style foam puzzle depicting animals (barcode 9316341171080).
- **EVA animal puzzle:** jigsaw-style foam puzzle depicting animals (barcode 9316341183403).
- **EVA board:** magnetic board with foam frame (barcode 9316341198124).
- **EVA craft shape:** foam stamp for use with inkpads (barcode 9316341198827).
- **EVA alphabet train puzzle:** foam puzzle depicting letters in a train shape (barcode 9316341170991).
- **EVA clock puzzle:** foam puzzle in a clock shape with movable hands and removable numbers (barcode 9316341136461).
- **EVA zoo animals:** jigsaw-style foam puzzle depicting animals (barcode 9316341198230).
- **Set of two tambourines:** each is approximately 12 cm in diameter, with 8 plastic discs 3.8 cm in diameter (barcode 9316341127773).
- **Wooden alpha shapes puzzle:** wooden shapes of alphabet letters (barcode 9316341131985).
- **Mini trains:** plastic multi-coloured train with two carriages (barcode 9316341143858).
- **Train puzzle:** toy train with three carriages, each including puzzle shapes (barcode 9316341145227).
- **Fire soldiers** (barcode 9316341166505).

The problem: They don't meet the mandatory Australian toy standards: projectiles are an eye hazard, warnings are incomplete and/or parts are a choking hazard.

What to do: Don't use any of the toys and take them away from children. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or phone (08) 9455 3200.

THE PRODUCT: Go-Lo and **Crazy Clark's** have recalled **microfibre jackets** with detachable hoods and embroidered logos, in sizes two to six, sold under Go-Lo code 638732 or Crazy Clark's code 3603871 from April to June 1, 2002.

The problem: The toggles on the drawstrings may be a choking hazard.

What to do: Either remove the end cap or toggles and barrel locks or return the jacket to Go-Lo or Crazy Clark's to have them removed or get a refund. For more information call Go-Lo on (02) 8796 6100 or Crazy Clark's on (07) 3860 9635.

THE PRODUCT: The Warehouse Australia has recalled the following chairs sold from Clints Crazy Bargains, Clints Warehouse, Silly Solly's, Solly's Warehouse and The Warehouse stores:

- **Small Como Chairs** in blue and white or green and white stripes, sold for $19.95 from July 1997 to May 22, 2002.
- **Kids Folding Chairs** with heart-shaped or round backrests and round seats in cow or leopard print, sold for $14.95 from January to May 22, 2002.

The problem: The scissor action could trap fingers.

What to do: Don't use it. Return it to one of the above stores for a refund, or call 1800 254 687.

THE PRODUCT: Independence Studios has recalled **folding heart chairs** with round seats and heart-shaped backs, in black and white cow print, leopard print and plain colours, sold from April 1, 2001, to March 1, 2002.

The problem: The scissor action could trap fingers.

What to do: Don't use it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, call (02) 9905 7988 or fax (02) 9905 0552.

THE PRODUCT: Vinaustrade has recalled **King New Soy Sauce** — all date markings and lot codes on products sold, usually in Asian food stores, before May 27, 2002, in Queensland.

The problem: It contains higher than acceptable levels of a chemical substance — 3-MCPD.

What to do: Throw it away or return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

THE PRODUCT: Schneider Electric has recalled **Square D QOE-RCBO circuit breakers** with residual current protection, manufactured from 1997 to 1999 (inclusive).

The problem: Some units may not provide earth leakage protection, posing a serious electrical safety hazard.

What to do: Go to www.schneider-electric.com.au for details on testing and replacement, phone 1300 369 233 or email help@schneider.com.au.

THE PRODUCT: Kawasaki Motors Australia has recalled **VN1500-P1 motorbikes** imported from September 2001, and sold before May 5, 2002.

The problem: Some parts may abrade and cause the turn signals, instrument lights and/or indicator lights to malfunction.

What to do: Contact your Kawasaki dealer.

THE PRODUCT: Nissan Australia has recalled 2001 year model **N16 Pulsar five-door hatch vehicles** with VINs from SJNFBAN16A 0150155 to 0218586.

The problem: The handbrake may self-release.

What to do: Contact any Nissan dealer.

THE PRODUCT: Honda Australia has recalled:

- **2000–2002 model Legend vehicles.**
- **1997 model Accord, 1998 model Civic, 1998–1999 model CR-V, 1997–1999 model Odyssey and 1998–1999 model Prelude vehicles.**

The problem: On the former, the brake lamps may not work. On the latter, the engine may stall without warning.

What to do: Contact an authorised Honda dealer.

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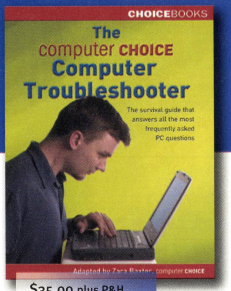
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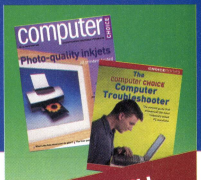

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* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items or letters. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts, many other small pieces, and recalls and bans.

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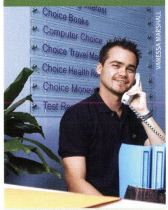

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YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE

.... despite what James Bond reckons. So surely the times it *doesn't* save you each year kind of negate the once that it does?

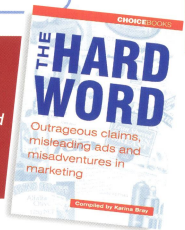
AWWW, NUTS!

If even water ice isn't 'safe', what's left in the way of treats for people allergic to nuts or gluten?

FLAVOURED & COLOURED WATER ICE

INGREDIENTS: SUGAR, FOOD ACID (330), FLAVOUR. WATER, EMULSIFIER (433), COLOURS (100, 102, 122, 133, 160b), VEGETABLE GUM (412). MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF GLUTEN AND NUTS.

Give dad a laugh for Father's Day with the *Hard Word* book. See page 35 to order.



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A blanket for all seasons?

If you find summers too cold and winters too hot, this is the blanket for you!

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It's huge! It's unique! It's a golden opportunity.
7 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, 2 lounges,
2 kitchens . . . . 300 m^2 of living area on 6633m^2 of land at Willaston in Gawler

Well, that should knock a few dollars off the price!

It's just a pity it's so hard these days to find doctors who make house calls ...

VALUE INDEED!

After all, it's so annoying when you buy a new car that doesn't include an engine — and so expensive to get one put in. But let's just hope it's not left-hand drive, like the one in the picture.

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The Hard Word would like to thank all the readers who've responded with examples of outrageous ads, promotions and products. Thanks to J Jones, R Viren, A Henderson, G Anderson, H Roberts, R Holden, M Hignett, J Higgs, L & E Boucher, J Chenery, H Walker, S Booth, S Hemmings and M Stork for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep sending them in.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or email your suggestions to thehardword@choice.com.au.

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